

NOVELS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ALF'S BUTTON

WISHES LIMITED

# THROUGH THE FOURTH WALL

BY  
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To  
ARCHIBALD HURD





## INTRODUCTION

ALL these essays—if so ambitious a word may be applied to writings so slight—were contributed in the first instance to the *Daily Telegraph*. They are printed here without any alterations except such as seemed inevitable in transferring them from the files of a newspaper to the more permanent form of a bound volume

Writings about the theatre are in their nature ephemeral. Plays pass and are gone, players make triumphs, disappear, and are too often forgotten. These writings of mine cover two years of dramatic criticism, and even in that short space there has been time to forget. When I began to read over the proofs of this book, I was amazed to find how faint had grown my memories of emotions which at their inception had been strong enough to make me want to record them. But as I read, the defaced impressions in my brain grew clearer, the colours brightened, and I recaptured for a moment the forgotten feelings of pleasure or disappointment, delight or distaste, which had been mine while the ink was still wet on the paper. It is in the hope that some other lovers of the theatre may find in these pages something of the same experience that I publish them now.

When I came to consider the question of the order

in which the essays should be placed, I found that they fell naturally into three groups, dealing respectively with players, with plays, and with the theatre generally. I have divided them accordingly, but within each group I have kept strictly to chronological order. Against each essay I have put the date on which it first appeared, in order to make clear any casual references to current events.

I should like to take this opportunity of thanking Viscount Burnham, C H, proprietor of the *Daily Telegraph*, for his kind and generously expressed permission to reprint my work.

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## THE FOURTH WALL

THE fourth wall—that invisible barrier which separates the inhabitants of a room on the stage from us ordinary mortals whose fortune it is to look but never enter in—is a piece of architecture unknown to our forefathers, but to the authors and producers of the present time it assumes from time to time the proportions of a problem. In the palmy days of the Manchester School, I seem to remember, it was the subject of much discussion. At the time, however, I was at too frivolous an age to take more than a casual interest in the question, so I come now to it with an unashamed ignorance as to what was said and who said it. All I do remember quite positively is that Pélissier and the Follies had a skit on the subject.

My thoughts have now been set running on the subject by a play I saw quite recently, in which one of the characters suddenly fixed a basilisk eye above my head and began to praise pictures which he seemed to spy either floating in the air or pinned to the rail of the balcony. I found myself worried and disturbed. So did some of the people round me, for they uttered the nervous kind of laugh which showed that they didn't quite know whether they were expected to show amusement or not. The effect of this touch of ruthless realism, so far as I was concerned, was the instant destruction of all sense of reality. (This is the invariable result of overdoing realism, by the way.) I discovered that I had no objection whatever to the

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subconscious knowledge that the stage room before me must possess a fourth wall, which had been taken bodily out like the front of a doll's house—and for the same excellent reason, that otherwise there could be no play. But I also discovered that I had a very lively objection to having the room's incompleteness rubbed into me, and there is no surer way of bringing home the fact that the fourth wall doesn't exist than by pretending that it does.

The first time I met with a device of the kind, I remember it pleased me mightily. The occasion was when, as a schoolboy, I was taken to see "The Passing of the Third Floor Back," at Terry's Theatre. I did not care much for the play, but the spectacle of the fire-irons laid before an imaginary hearth, and of the characters warming their hands at the pale and ineffectual fire of the footlights, filled my infant mind with glee. I thought it a miracle of stage ingenuity. Since then, I suppose, I must have grown more sophisticated, or more prejudiced. Anyhow, devices of the kind only produce irritation in me nowadays—irritation and a most undesirable sense of disillusion. I object very strongly to being reminded from the stage that the stage is only the stage. It gives me the first faint, far-away beginnings of a fellow-feeling with the gentleman in Mr. Norman Douglas's "South Wind" who remarked, "It saddens me a little to see grown-up men and women strolling about in funny dressing-gowns and pretending to be kings and queens." I am quite content to know, as a matter of stern fact to be pondered by the intellect away from the theatre—say, in an essay like this—that a stage room is not exactly like a real room.

It must lack something. It may be complete except for the fourth wall, it may, on the other hand, lack parts of the side walls and a considerable area of floor-space. In the case I have already quoted, where a young man made believe to admire imaginary pictures, the missing wall—judging from the direction of his eyes and the position of the furniture—must have stood just about where the middle rows of the stalls actually were. That is to say, the stage only represented half of the room. Well, that is a necessary convention of the theatre which I have learnt to accept, and which has therefore ceased altogether to trouble me. But once I had been so baldly informed that there were pictures to be examined above my head, I became disagreeably conscious that there was also floor to be trodden in front of the footlights. I realised that the characters were being arbitrarily confined to one side of their room—a liberty which no real people would put up with for a minute—in short, I lost all sense of reality, all illusion. The kings and queens suddenly dwindled to grown-up people in funny dressing-gowns, playing at make-believe.

But if the spectator ought never be allowed to remember the fourth wall, it follows that the actor should never allow himself to forget it. This is a necessity newly imposed upon him by the modern "picture stage." In the Elizabethan days, when there was no proscenium and no scenery, the audience was expected to make believe, and did so as a matter of course. The actor was delightfully untrammelled. He had at his command that mighty weapon the direct appeal, which we have restricted to music-halls, revues, and the lighter forms of entertainment gener-



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ally When the Elizabethan actor came across a particularly fine rhetorical passage he could throw off any sense of his surroundings, advance to the front of his platform-stage, and speak straight to his audience—an audience, remember, which was not merely in front of him, but all about him, too—as man to men. Since he and they were all making believe together, all was well. It simply did not occur to any of them that an insurmountable barrier could exist between the real and the mimic world.

Such relations between a player and his audience exist no longer in serious drama. Each inhabits a separate sphere. The character in a play is a shadow in a world of shadows, going about his shadowy business, unconscious of being overlooked. The spectator stands to him in the relation of a privileged eavesdropper—of some interested but impotent god. This illusion it is the player's task to create, that is to say, he must no more share in it than the conjurer must believe in his own tricks. The actor has a perfectly definite problem before him. He is put into a room with three walls and told to behave himself so that nobody will notice that there are not four. Every movement must be regulated with reference not only to the three existing walls, but also to the fourth non-existent one. He must know just where it is, too. For instance—to apply Euclid's pleasant method of the *reductio ad absurdum*—it is highly unusual for a man in real life to deliver an impassioned speech of love with his nose pressed firmly against the wall, hence, if the fourth wall runs along the line of the footlights, the actor may be well advised to keep up stage. This is hardly, I think, a point that I need

labour, but it is important, all the same. This realisation of the fourth wall by the actor has released him from one or two fetters that used to cramp him terribly. There was once a rule—still passionately upheld, I believe, in amateur theatricals of the less progressive type—that you must not turn your back on the audience. Now that the actor is no longer supposed to know that the audience exists, that idea has perished. He may turn his back as often as natural behaviour in his mimic world demands it of him. (Of course, it is his duty, as a producer of illusion, to avoid where possible making long or very important speeches in such a position, because it is not worth while to sacrifice clarity to verisimilitude. But that is by the way.) Yet another rule that the actor cannot now forget with impunity is that his words are addressed primarily to somebody in his own mimic world, and not to those far-away eavesdroppers beyond the fourth wall. These and other improvements we owe to the obtrusion of this awkward piece of masonry upon the actor's conscience.

But I would repeat once more, do not let it obtrude itself upon the mind of the spectator. That way madness lies. If the picture-gazing business is going to be carried to its logical conclusion, one of our bright young playwrights will discover one of these days that the fourth wall ought to have a window in it, through which his characters can speak to passers-by in a street which runs through the orchestra. On that day, I shall probably be borne shrieking from my seat and clapped into Colney Hatch, and, once I get clear of the theatre, I shall go quietly—even gratefully

—9th March, 1922



## ABOUT PLAYERS



## MAURICE MOSCOVITCH AS SHYLOCK

SHAKESPEARE'S plays are of inexhaustible interest both to the student and to the actor, because his great characters have so much subtlety and depth that new readings and new interpretations are still to be sought even now, three hundred years and more since the plays were written. Shylock is such a character, though perhaps he offers more opportunity to the actor than to the student. Scholars have in general agreed to accept the view that Shakespeare began the "Merchant of Venice" with the intention of painting a picture of the completely villainous Jew according to the canons of Elizabethan convention. Shylock was to have been just such another as Marlowe's Jew of Malta. But, the theory continues, when Shakespeare began to clothe Shylock's villainous bones with flesh and blood, behold! the Jew became a man—a man thinking his own thoughts, swayed by his own emotions,\*a man bent on vengeance, perhaps, but on vengeance in return for very real wrongs.

And so, when the climax comes and his vengeance returns upon his own head, and he leaves the court of justice broken and beaten and impoverished, the reader feels for this villainous Jew a pity and a reluctant sympathy which (it is supposed) must have been quite outside the playwright's original intention.

That is how the text of the play affects the student. How that text may affect a theatre audience is another question, the answer depends entirely upon what the actor makes of Shylock's character. On the stage Shylock may be made either the villain of a comedy—as was plainly the original intention—or he may equally become something much more like the hero of a tragedy. We have had both renderings, both have their qualities and their defects, their adherents and their opponents. Therefore, before this revival of the "Merchant of Venice" was produced at the Court Theatre, much interest was aroused as to which interpretation Mr Maurice Moscovitch would prefer.

There was good reason to expect that the latter would be his choice. The foremost Jewish actor was to take the most famous Jewish part. Surely he would give us a Shylock more outstandingly the hero of his own tragedy than any yet seen. But those who expected something of this kind were disappointed—or rather not disappointed, but surprised. Moscovitch's Shylock calls for little sympathy, while pity is utterly out of place. You might equally well pity a Bengal tiger in mid-spring.

This Shylock is at no single moment anything but the villain of the play, yet he has a consistency and a strength which no other has quite attained. The actor has behind him the memory of the long history of Christian tyrannies to which his race has been subjected. He has more, he is a Russian Jew, and he has knowledge of the pogroms by which his countrymen have been persecuted right up to our own time. In consequence, he realises and makes us see, in a way that no predecessor has even attempted, the burning,

fiery hatred of his Christian oppressors with which Shylock is informed. He is hate personified. From the moment of his first appearance until his final departure from the stage, he is dangerous. He is from the first merely waiting his chance to feed fat the ancient grudge he bears, not only to Antonio, but to the whole Christian commonwealth of Venice.

Indeed, so intensely does he long for the opportunity that he seems in some sinister fashion to make that opportunity occur. The means by which he gets Antonio into his power seem far enough from any chance of success, but there is no sense of strangeness, or of fortuitous misfortune, when we hear that the argosies of the Merchant have been lost. It is as though some malignant spirit of hatred, brought into being by the strength and fury of the Jew's desire, had deliberately caused the wreck of that tall ship in the Narrow Seas. And this hatred is as strong and as dangerous at the end of the Trial Scene as at that scene's beginning.

This is where the actor's reading of Shylock diverges most sharply from that of the student. The Jew is impoverished indeed, but he is neither beaten nor broken. He goes back to his house, stricken for the moment, and forced to abjure his religion. But his hatred is undimmed. His spirit is unconquered, and, it seems, unconquerable. Nothing is more certain than that Antonio and Bassanio will need to look to themselves in the future. They will stand more "in the danger" of Shylock the Christian than ever they did of Shylock the Jew. He is brought low for the moment, but a man of his strength of purpose cannot be kept down for long. Never again,



if he values his safety, must Antonio (good, easy man!) allow himself to "say there is much kindness in the Jew"

Such actors as have made Shylock to some extent a sympathetic or heroic part have always laid stress upon one human trait which they profess to find in his character—his love for his daughter Jessica. Of this, Moscovitch shows no trace. He has plainly done with her from the moment she leaves his house. He feels nothing at her flight but bitter resentment, for two causes. She has robbed him of his ducats and his jewels, and by going off with a Christian she has at once gone over to the enemy and made him look an impotent fool in those enemies' eyes. He becomes a butt for the thinly veiled insolence of those who were in the plot for her elopement, and his hatred finds scope to include Jessica from that time on. He speaks no more than the simple truth when he says, "Would she were hearsed at my feet, and the ducats in her coffin." Such a man is too big, too dangerous, too terrible, to be pitied. When he is brought down, all we can feel is an immense relief that Antonio has escaped from his clutches, a relief which ought to—and in every real sense does—end the play.

For Moscovitch's reading, just because it is so great and so intense, robs Shakespeare's last act of all meaning or *raison d'être*. Mr William Archer has declared that even for the reader "The Merchant of Venice" ends with the conclusion of the Trial Scene, pointing out that the fifth act is an independent after-piece. From the point of view of pure technique this criticism is undoubtedly justified, but from the practical point of view it is not possible to say dog-

matically that the act has no dramatic value It may have, or it may not It depends upon Shylock

To the student, reading the text with no interpretation but that of his own brain to shape his judgment, the fifth act is emotionally necessary The end of the Trial Scene leaves him in a condition of unwilling sympathy with Shylock, and if the play ended there it would afflict him with a vague disappointment which would spoil his enjoyment of Portia's victory and his satisfaction at the safety of Antonio The Jew's traces must be covered up, now that he has left the stage, he must be relegated once more to the position of unregenerate villain to which he has so far refused to be confined Those whom he has injured must be exhibited, happy and care-free because his influence has been removed And so we have the wonderful scene in Portia's garden, where Lorenzo and the runaway daughter Jessica are making inspired love under the stars

The last remnants of an uneasy sense that Jessica has treated her father abominably disappear when we see how real is the happiness for which she deserted him And it is worth noting that from this point on Shylock's name is never even mentioned again By the time the end is reached the Jew, if he is remembered at all, remains in our minds only as an evil influence which has been successfully combated, and not only scotched, but killed The same is true of a stage version in which the actor has portrayed a "sympathetic" Shylock In both these cases the last act appears not as an integral part of the action, but as a necessary dramatic expedient to secure a completely satisfactory close to the play But, on

the other hand, an unsympathetic Shylock—and, most particularly of all, Moscovitch's Shylock—deprives this final act of all dramatic weight or consequence. The climax of the action arrives at the moment when Portia, just when all seems lost and Antonio is baring his breast to the knife, warns Shylock that under the bond to which he has insisted upon such literal adherence, he is allowed no drop of blood. Once Antonio has been freed from the peril which appeared likely to overwhelm him, once Shylock—full to the last of passionate though temporarily impotent hatred—has tottered out on Tubal's arm, the tension snaps, and the play is at an end. Knowledge of the text, or reference to the programme, are the only reasons which any member of the audience could give for retaining his seat after this. When the curtain rises again it is upon a new play, slight but most exquisitely written, concerning some of the characters who appeared in the drama just ended.

But the new play is of quite different kind from the life-and-death struggle against hate incarnate in which we last saw those characters engaged. This is a gay trifle, devised in the highest of good spirits, but there seems no particular reason why it should have been included in the evening's entertainment—from which it appears that Moscovitch is a great Shylock, but not Shakespeare's.

—4th March, 1920

## THE TRAGIC ACTRESS

MISS GENEVIEVE WARD, who, if not the oldest living actress, is at any rate the oldest acting actress on our stage, has been speaking winged words on the decadence of our times. Interviewed on the occasion of her eighty-third birthday, she expressed strong views on the manners and customs of the young woman of the period, and went on to deplore the dearth of tragic actresses on our stage. "The present-day actresses," she said, "have not the physique for tragedy. The work in the old days was so much more strenuous for actresses than it is to-day, and in the past the women did not jump from tragedy to comedy and farce and back again as they do now. They stuck to their métier, and their art was all the better for it."

There is certainly nobody who has a better right to speak on this subject than Miss Ward, who can look back upon her own long and triumphant career, first in grand opera and then in tragic parts, and with all confidence challenge the stage of this generation to produce anybody likely to rival her record. It is also true that we are not to-day rich in tragic actresses. But it is at least doubtful whether the reasons assigned by Miss Ward for the change are the real reasons. It is not even certain that the modern girl is lacking in physique, at any rate, from her has been evolved that modern marvel of endurance, the cinema heroine.

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And it is at least an arguable view that the reason why the modern stage has few tragediennes is not lack of capacity so much as lack of demand

Public taste in drama is subject to changes of fashion, and the fashion in drama has altered greatly, mainly because of the change in its public. Time was when the theatres appealed only to a certain limited class—the aristocracy—and all plays were written on that understanding. Playwrights were courtiers, and dealt only with themes and characters such as might be acceptable to the Court. Tragedy then was all the rage, poor poets, their manuscripts sticking out of their pockets as inevitably as their elbows stuck out of their ragged sleeves, jostled one another in the endeavour to find some rich Mæcenæ who would stand sponsor to their sad stories of the deaths of kings. Behind them they had the Greek tradition that the only fit theme for tragedy is the struggle of a human being of great position, cast in the heroic mould, and yet neither too good nor too bad to win our sympathy, against an adverse fate which, in the end, proves itself too strong for even the mightiest mortal to contend with. Tragedy did not concern itself with little lives, nor with mean streets. Its hero might only excite our pity as a beggar if he had once been a king.

Such was the tradition as the Court dramatists accepted it, and it was preserved intact until long after their time. But with the rise of a wider interest in the stage a change began to set in, the theatre became more and more a popular institution, and realised that it must deal with the themes that intrigued its public. Those themes gradually ceased

to be the great problems of princes, and became the little problems of ordinary men. Since, according to the ancient formula, tragedy cannot concern itself with such subjects, tragedy according to the ancient formula has ceased to be written. Realism has taken its place—a true attempt at the imitation of life as the plain man knows it. Since in life the tragic and comic elements are so knit together that they cannot be separated, so in the modern play the two are closely interwoven. Unlike its predecessors, modern drama cannot be divided off into two sharply contrasted heaps, labelled respectively “Comedy” and “Tragedy.”

There is another reason why the democratisation of the theatre has driven tragedy out of favour. It has to some extent lowered the average intellectual standard of the man in the audience. A theatre which caters for the taste of a wide public must not be too sophisticated for its audience, and an audience must attain to a very considerable degree of sophistication before it can rise above an artless desire for happy endings. Appreciation or enjoyment of tragedy is an art which requires intellectual training and practice. It is true that there are many simple souls who “go to the play for a good cry”, but their good cry comes usually from the contemplation of sentimentalisms—beautiful death-bed scenes to slow music, and so on—rather than the stark passions of tragedy. They go home with the easy tears on their cheeks, but with their souls unharrowed.

The plays and the public of to-day create a demand rather for all-round emotional actresses of quick human sympathy than for tragediennes, but here and

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there, even to-day, an actress of exceptional depth and power finds herself impelled to resuscitate the old fine tragic parts and to pit herself against the great women who played those parts to bygone generations. At the present moment such a revival is being carried out by Miss Sybil Thorndike with such striking success that the modern stage may look to her to make possible in the near future a complete denial of Miss Ward's strictures.

Miss Thorndike has been known for some years as one of the most promising of the younger school of actresses, and as a prominent member of Miss Horniman's famous repertory company in Manchester she showed what she could do in modern realistic and introspective drama. It was recognised that in her we had an emotional actress of high merit, but it was not until she began to play her present series of parts that she gave a real indication of the true quality that is in her. In "Candida" and "Tom Trouble" she is, of course, seen in the kind of part with which she has been identified for a long time, and both are extremely clever, sincere, and thoughtful pieces of work. As "Candida," indeed, she displays a tenderness and a sense of humour which are both admirable. But it is her work in her other two parts, and particularly as Hecuba, which lifts her into a new category altogether.

Euripides' two plays, the "Medea" and "The Trojan Women," are specimens of the old type of tragedy at its purest. Both display, from beginning to end, the agonies of great souls in torment, neither Medea nor Hecuba is allowed a moment's respite. Either part subjects the tragic powers of an actress to

the most searching test it is possible to imagine Miss Thorndike passes this test with high honours In the " Medea " she gives an exhibition of sheer power which is in itself enough to refute the criticism that the actress of to-day has not the physique for a tragic part She begins the part at so high a pitch of emotion that it seems plainly impossible that she will be able to maintain it till the close without allowing the tension to drop , and, indeed, she does not quite succeed

Nevertheless, none but an actress with a great tragic gift could come so near to complete success Her failure to carry us with her quite to the end is due chiefly to her reading of the part Her Medea is too inhuman to command sympathy She is the barbarian sorceress, aching and thirsting for revenge, rather than the wronged wife seeking just retribution " Nobody," wrote Dr Gilbert Murray once in a criticism of this play, " can help siding with Medea " But I do not find it easy to side with Miss Thorndike's Medea To this extent, but only to this extent, does she fail of complete success But her Hecuba is a really great achievement It is quieter than the Medea, deeper and stronger, more intense and more moving The tortures she has to bear are more varied and terrible, her method of bearing them more noble It is, apart from its force, a notable piece of character acting, for in " Medea " the actress can appear in her own youth and strength and beauty, only adding a touch of the inhuman , but in " Hecuba " she is an old woman, her strength broken, her beauty faded—only her spirit still retains its old-time strength and dignity But it is in the quietness of it that the power



lies    Hecuba's most poignant moments are not when she is bewailing her own and her children's fate, nor yet when she is expressing her hatred of Helen and lust for vengeance upon her, they come when she is silent, listening to the pitiful outburst of Andromache. It is a real triumph of acting to achieve such a result by sheer unaided intensity of feeling, and the actress here raises her Hecuba to the position of a great part, greatly played.

Miss Thorndike has in these parts scored a great *succès d'estime*, which gives us reason to hope that it is only the earnest of still bigger things to come. Every natural advantage is hers, she is, like the parts she plays, cast in the heroic mould. It seems certain that she has only to be given a real chance to make a big popular success, which will draw even the present-day public to see her and will give her undisputed title to be called our foremost—Miss Genevieve Ward would probably say our only—tragic actress.

—8th April, 1920

## THE GUITRYS

THE Guity season, after proving one of the outstanding theatrical successes of the year, has now come to an end. So great was the demand for seats at the Aldwych that our French visitors were persuaded to extend their stay from the four weeks originally intended to five. Even then the season proved too short, though it was long enough to come as a real revelation to the English play-going public. Before this visit, neither Lucien nor Sacha Guity was more than a name to a great section of London play-goers, and to a greater number still they were not even that. Now they have established themselves as two living and separate personalities.

It is very much to be hoped that their playing has come equally as a revelation to our own native artists. If I may be allowed to impart an air of distinction to my otherwise bald and unconvincing prose by the use of an apposite Latin tag, I should like to remark that *fas est et ab hoste doceri* is a sentiment whose essential truth is in no way impaired by the fact that *hostis* must here be translated "friendly rival." From these particular rivals there are several important lessons to be learnt. The biggest of these, for those who have the skill to emulate without imitating, is the great art of doing nothing at all (or seeming to), and yet holding the stage.

THIS, when you come to think of it, is a very pretty paradox. The traditional British comic-paper conception of the Frenchman is a gesticulatory and excitable creature, whose head has a tendency to disappear between his shoulders in a disconcerting but characteristic shrug. The Englishman, on the other hand, has a reputation for being exactly the opposite, stolid and—if the word really means what I hope it does, not having a dictionary at hand—lymphatic. Yet it is from this same gesticulatory creature that the stolid Englishman is expected to learn stage repose.

The paradox is more apparent than real. It is a fact that the gestures which these French actors do use are more florid than any that we are used to, and in an Englishman would look extravagant and foolish. That is where the difference of the national characteristics comes in, and in that particular respect the actors of each country must go their own way. But the important point is that when they choose our late visitors can dispense with gesture altogether in a way which few Englishmen could attempt without becoming immobile and lifeless. In the first act of "*Mon Père Avait Raison*," for instance, the two Guitrys sit solidly one on each side of a table and hold a conversation of a length which the average English actor could hardly expect to carry through without a snoring obligato from the audience. The secret here lies in their extraordinary command of facial expression, an instrument in whose use they are undoubtedly far more expert than our own compatriots. Here, again, the common tradition is confuted. The comic-paper Frenchman certainly makes un-English use of facial expression—because he grimaces in a way which

## THE GUITRYS

makes an Englishman ill with self-consciousness. The Guitrys do not grimace, ever. Only they have mastered the art of expressing by a twitch of the lip or a lift of the eyebrow things which the less skilled actor must convey by means of ponderous by-play.

Sacha Guitry is the outstanding member of this wonderful little family party. Like Kipling's mariner, through whose instrumentality the whale got his throat, he is "a man of infinite resource and sagacity." Consider his use of the telephone. Playwrights in this country have begun to avoid the telephone, as being a mechanical and easy (and therefore unconvincing) stage device. Sacha Guitry, on the other hand, loves the telephone for its own sake, and uses it freely. But he seldom uses it in the same way or for the same purpose twice. Each time he gets a definite and different effect from it.

Speaking from memory, I recall five telephone conversations in particular. The first is the ridiculous little scene in "La Prise de Berg-op-Zoom," in which the Commissioner of Police, calling up his clerk in the next room, is answered from the door by the clerk in person, but continues his instructions into the instrument in the firm belief that the answers are coming over the wire. The instructions given, the clerk closes the door, the commissioner hangs up the instrument and goes on with his work, still blissfully ignorant that his conversation has been in any way out of the ordinary—a splendid example of effective restraint on the part of the playwright. In "L'Illusioniste," when Miss Hopkins rings up the conjurer to warn him against going off with Jacqueline, we are allowed to hear her voice over the

while as well as Paul's replies. In "Mon Père Avait Raison" there is the exceedingly effective emotional scene, where Germaine Bellanger rings her husband up from the station to tell him she is leaving him, there is Mlle Printemps' amusing little effort as the girl who is unused to and distrustful of the telephone, and finally there is her husband, as the man trying to get a word edgewise into the torrents of speech with which his unheard interlocutor is evidently overwhelming him. These are small points, but they are characteristic of the "infinite resource" of Guitry's methods, and the quality which their leader displays in his writing the whole family—or, rather, the whole company—displays in its acting. None of them are ever at a loss for the right tone or gesture. Consequently they never sink for an instant into dullness or monotony.

It is possible that many people will be inclined to ascribe this last achievement to personality—the magnetic ascendancy which certain richly dowered actors are able to establish over an audience, so that (in the words of Jack Point) "an accepted wit has but to say 'Pass the mustard!' and they roar their ribs out." Those to whom heaven has vouchsafed this supreme gift seem to have to learn so little, their only need is for enough technique to enable them to be themselves on the stage as certainly as they are in private. It is upon this gift that the great "funny men" must rely exclusively—the Charlie Chaplins, the George Robeys, the Leslie Hensons achieve fame simply through the exaggeration of personal idiosyncrasies, and it is probably true to say that nobody can attain to real greatness in any branch of acting with-

out possessing personal magnetism of this kind The three Guitrys themselves certainly have it But there is another form of stage personality which is not a gift It is the outcome of hard work, and the hall-mark of finished and assured technique It is the quality which Demosthenes attained when, starting with the handicap of a stammer, he made himself the most polished orator in ancient Greece This form of personality every member of the French company has achieved, and it is in this that they should be a valuable object-lesson to their English confrères

This last statement is not to be construed as an attempt to compare the English stage with the French to our own very great disadvantage There has been a considerable tendency to do so, because we are proverbially a nation with a happy knack of decrying our own products People have talked at large about the French season having shown up the incompetence of the English stage, and so forth, and so on All this is very British, but neither necessary nor true The Guitrys and their company are some of the most finished products of the Paris stage, and therefore should be compared only with our own players of equal eminence The best of our own actors and actresses have nothing to fear from comparison with them or any other artists from other countries, talk of this kind is nothing but sheer waste of time It does no good to anyone to behave as though the Aldwych season had been organised as a kind of international competition on the lines of Henley or the Carpentier-Beckett encounter The great value of the Guitrys' visit has been not that they have made all except the

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best of our own players look like not too capable amateurs (after all, our own leading lights often do that), but that they have given those players a chance of profiting by their example in attempts to reach their standard of excellence

—17th June, 1920

## BIRMINGHAM REPERTORY THEATRE

MODESTY is a very beautiful quality, no doubt. In violets and village maidens it is—or used to be—a *ne plus ultra* (or do I mean a *sine qua non*?) It adds an endearing human charm to popular heroes, and even popular actors find that a thin veneer of it is not an actual hindrance to them in their endeavours to gain public approval. But in theatrical companies, regarded from the collective standpoint, modesty has only the charm of novelty to recommend it, all of which remarks are designed to lead up to an accusation against the Birmingham Repertory Theatre that it does not advertise itself enough.

There has been more than a sufficiency of unsuccessful plays produced at West End theatres during the season now drawing to its close, and the failures have been ascribable to many causes, but there has not been one of them which can truly be said to have failed owing to inadequate advertising. Indeed, it has seemed more than once that the volume and power of the advertisements have been exactly in inverse ratio to the merits of the play they recommended, rather as though some delighted hen were filling the farmyard with her loud triumphant cackling over an egg which turned out, on examination, to be nothing but an empty shell. That is an annoying state of things, no doubt, but the exactly opposite condition is



just as irritating—I mean, where the hen lays a beautiful brown egg with a double yolk, which never comes to table because its progenitress forgets—or possibly considers it beneath her dignity—to cackle at all. That really seems to be the attitude of those in authority at Birmingham. They appear to be bent on doing good by stealth—though I should hesitate to suggest that they would go so far as to blush to find it fame. It seems a pity.

Until eighteen months or so ago the general public knew nothing much about the Birmingham Repertory Company, it had a hazy kind of idea that something of the sort existed, but that was about all. Then “Abraham Lincoln” was brought to the Lyric Theatre at Hammersmith, and for a year the general public sat up and took notice. The play, which was not only acted by the company but also written by its general manager, was acclaimed in all quarters as the best play of its year. The general public said to itself that these people obviously knew what they were about, and was prepared to take an interest in their future productions. But now the company has gone back to its own home, and is hiding its light under a bushel as carefully as though Abraham Lincoln had never existed. It possesses leaders of vision and experience, who have brought together a capable and enthusiastic band of actors, and take more pleasure in ability to act than in any man’s—or woman’s—legs. They also produce plays which are worth while on sound lines. And yet hardly anybody outside Birmingham and its delectable surroundings is allowed to know what they are up to at any given moment. How many of those who

read these words, for instance, know what is on at Birmingham this week? As a matter of fact, I am not quite certain myself

I have a special reason for insisting on dragging the Birmingham Theatre (as Gilbert dragged Policeman Peter Forth) "from its obscure retreat" in this unfeeling way. Nearly three weeks ago it came out—quite by accident, of course—that the authorities there were about to produce "The Witch," and I felt that I should like to see it. It is not exactly a great play, but nobody who saw Miss Lillah McCarthy in the part of Anne Pedersdotter in 1911, and subsequently, needs to be told that it is both powerful and interesting, or that it is a more than ordinarily good test of acting. The whole effect of the play depends upon atmosphere, that is to say, upon the direct personal ascendancy which the actors on the stage can establish over you in the audience. The really important thing is not so much what they are saying as what they are making you think.

Anne Pedersdotter, the victim of the ignorance of 1574, is gradually proved—and believes herself—to be a witch, and to have had dealings with the devil, by reason of evidence you (sitting in the auditorium with your scientific 1920 brain) know to be due to the possession of quite ordinary hypnotic or psychic gifts. Three and a half centuries of research and progress have placed you (by comparison with the characters of the play) in the position of a god, looking down from Olympus upon poor human beings caught in the toils of their own ignorance. So long as the actress who plays Anne Pedersdotter can grip your remote and godlike sympathy, you are held tensely

and yet more tensely till the last curtain falls upon her breakdown and the damning evidence of her confession, and you emerge at the end into your own world with much the feeling of limp relief which a visit to the dentist produces. But supposing Anne failed to grip you, I imagine that the play would cease altogether to have either interest or meaning for you. You would probably grow more remote still, and too contemptuously godlike to care about the troubles of these puny mortals. I use the word "probably" on purpose, because I do not happen to have seen this play badly acted—certainly not at Birmingham. Miss Susan Richmond, as Anne, gave a performance of quite peculiar power and intensity, and gave her audience the post-dentist sensation in its acutest form. And although it is upon Anne that the success of the play must rest, the remainder of the company did excellent work also, they showed that they have that merit which is a repertory company's most important asset—they are evenly balanced. The company is a constellation of small stars, all about the same size, too many of our London companies are more apt to resemble a comet—one large star, followed by a long tail of very little ones.

Not only does this company possess the repertory theatre virtue, but it also steers clear of what is too often the repertory theatre vice. There is in it no tendency towards preciosity and "highbrowism." Indeed, none of the "isms" appear to have established a hold here at all. The whole production of "The Witch" was carried through with an air of incisiveness and certainty which spoke of knowledge both of what he meant to do and how he ought to do

it on the part of the producer. The scenes were simple and effective, conveying the same impression of quiet confidence. The last scene, the choir of the cathedral where the body of Anne's ill-fated husband was lying, was an object-lesson in the art of obtaining the greatest effect with the least effort. The chief and only aim of this little band of enthusiasts seems to be not to preach the doctrine of this or that, nor to go soaring above the head of the average discriminating play-goer, but simply to get hold of plays which are worth acting, and to stage these as well as their resources will allow. They have, I gather, some very interesting plans for the future. It is to be hoped that when the time comes there may be discovered in Birmingham somebody of coarse enough fibre to divulge these plans to the public.

—8th July, 1920

## THE NEW SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

It is a great wonder to me how Mr Bridges-Adams and his comrades of the New Shakespeare Company manage to remain as cheerful and as light-hearted as they do. This is not an attack on the Stratford-on-Avon climate, although on my last visit it did seem to be bent on showing just exactly what it was capable of on a bad day. It is a reference rather to the immense weight of responsibility which this devoted band has to bear. It can be no light thing to realise that you are the joint offspring of two Movements (one national and the other hallowed by local tradition) to raise to the name of England's greatest poet a memorial worthy of him. Put this way, it is a thought of appalling solemnity calculated to paralyse the boldest producer. It is too much to ask anybody to live up to, and Mr Bridges-Adams, like a wise man, is not attempting to live up to any such terrifying conception. He is simply trying, according to his lights, to get down to Shakespeare.

The average conventional man with no desire to be considered either specially literary or a Philistine is usually rather frightened of Shakespeare. Ask him what he thinks about the Bard and a wary look will come into his eye. He will mutter hurriedly, "Er—yes. Of course—very fine—er, wonderful!" and will change the subject hastily. If he is of the

bluff, honest, tell-the-truth-however-much-of-a-fool-it-makes-me-look type, he may say, "Of course, I know Shakespeare's very fine, and all that, but personally I haven't enough literary taste to appreciate him" If you pursued your inquiry and pinned down either of these gentlemen to answer honestly the question, "Have you ever read Shakespeare?" their answer would probably be, "Oh, I did some of 'em at school, you know Haven't touched him since" And if you got right down to the bottom of these men's minds, you would find in both of them the same fundamental opinion—that Shakespeare is infernally dull, only it would be blasphemy to say so The word "blasphemy" brings me to another class of people—the earnest type who approach Shakespeare in exactly the same frame of mind as they do their Bible, even to the extent of mixing up the quotations from each (With a little luck you can always make a member of this class believe that "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child" comes out of Proverbs) To them it is sacrilege to say that any one of the plays is worse than any other It is all Shakespeare—therefore perfect These people very seldom suffer from a sense of humour, and when they go to see the comedies acted they like them to be done with a becoming reverence In fact, they swallow Shakespeare whole at the beginning of their lives and never manage to digest him on this side of the grave

Actors, producers, and people like that who have read Shakespeare not because a schoolmaster insisted on expounding him to them, nor yet for vaguely ritualistic reasons, but simply because he wrote rattling good plays, realise that he is not dull But

they generally despair of ever being able to persuade the public of this, they know that a man who will not read a word of Shakespeare is not particularly likely to pay considerable sums to see him acted. Nor does he. He stays away from the theatre for exactly the same reason as he refrains from opening the book—because he is convinced that it will bore him. Probably, if he is persuaded to make the experiment, he finds that it does bore him. His judgment is fettered. He knows that unless he shows pleasure in what he sees he will be put down as a crass Philistine. So when, after the play, the worshippers all about him begin their chorus of praise, he acquiesces weakly—and firmly determines in his own mind that this is the last time. Have you ever had the experience of going to see a successful comedy for the first time which those about you have seen several times before and know to some extent by heart, and show the fact by laughing at all the points just as (or just before) they are made? If you have, and if, like me, you have found yourself ever afterwards prejudiced against that particular play and disinclined ever to see it again, you will appreciate the feelings of the average man in an audience full of Shakespearean ritualists.

One effect of this is that when a producer arrives who treats Shakespeare frankly as a peg upon which to hang his own fantastic ideas he is bound to have a certain following among those whom the "ritualistic" atmosphere has oppressed. I know people, and I expect you do, too, who never took visits to Shakespearean plays as anything but a rather boring duty until Mr Granville Barker gilded the faces of his

fairies in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" Then they opened their eyes wide "Aha!" they said "Here we have it at last! This is Shakespeare!" So it was, to some extent, but it was much more Granville Barker, who had shocked the ritualists out of somnolent worship into indignant protests, and had dispersed the gloom which their former attitude had generated But these productions only had a limited appeal, they were "too futuristic" to appeal to a wide public

The problem before the Shakespearean producer nowadays is how to give a version of the plays that will appeal to the widest possible public He wants to produce in the average man the same feeling as prompted Judy Abbott in "Daddy-Long-Legs" to remark, "I've just been to see 'Hamlet,' and it was *perfectly corking*" Do you know, I've always till now suspected Shakespeare of going on his reputation "This exactly illustrates the attitude of mind with which I am dealing The average man, whose acquaintance with Shakespeare is limited to having learnt "The Quality of Mercy" and "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" by heart at school, certainly does suspect him of going on his reputation The only thing which can make such a man change his mind is, to give him, not a "perfectly corking" *production* of Shakespeare so much as a production which will make him realise that the plays themselves are "perfectly corking" There is a growing realisation to-day that the best way to do this is to give the public pure and undiluted Shakespeare—to depend on the play and the acting rather than the settings

The success of the "Old Vic" in its "Shake-



speare for the people " season is a case in point, and (to get back at last to my original theme) Mr Bridges-Adams seems to me to be making a praiseworthy attempt at achievement along the same lines. His chief aims in production are speed and simplicity. He divides each play into two parts, with one long interval between them, and this method is much less wearisome than the multitude of short waits between scenes and longer waits between acts, which used to be inseparable from Shakespearean productions. The system has its drawbacks, of course. The necessary speed is sometimes overdone, and the backcloth of a closing scene may be observed rolling up before the front curtains have had time to screen it from view, and sometimes the voices of the actors at the front of the stage are almost drowned in the noise caused by the stage hands getting the next set ready. But these defects can be remedied with practice and forethought. The general result of the method is to throw up into proper relief the play itself and the acting. There can be no elaborate scenes under such circumstances to distract the attention of the audience. The company is keen, and acts with a sense of enjoyment that is infectious. That is why I feel that, given more time and more experience, Mr Bridges-Adams and his company are as likely as anybody in the country to prove to the unbeliever that Shakespeare, when not swallowed whole, administered in doses like medicine, or exalted into a religion, really is " perfectly corking "

—5th August, 1920

## ENGLISH ACTRESSES IN FRENCH PARTS

THE number of plays which come to us from France has always been, and still is, so great that every leading actress is bound, sooner or later, to have a French part to play. That is, of course, a part which is quite definitely French in conception, though it is to be acted in English. To decide exactly how such a part should be played is a very anxious task for the actress, and for the critic such a difficult question that I do not propose to try so much to find a solution as to define the problem.

The usual effect of trying to appear French on an English actress is to throw her Anglicity, or Anglicism (Englishness is what I mean), into strong relief. Think, for example, of Miss Phyllis Dare in "Kissing Time". She was charming, no doubt, but what was she doing with a name like Georgette? Think of Miss Renée Kelly's imitation of a French girl in "French Leave". It is a clever imitation, but never the real thing. And if it is so difficult for our actresses to move and look like Frenchwomen, what about the still deeper problem of thinking like them? And the worse problem still, of behaving as they do under an emotional strain? Think of Miss Ethel Irving in "The Three Daughters of Monsieur Dupont". It was a magnificent piece of emotional acting as I saw it some years back, but no more French than the Nelson monument in Trafalgar Square.

To say all this is not to decry our actresses in any way. French actresses would have the same difficulty in appearing English. It would be very hard to say whether Mlle Yvonne Printemps's impersonation of an English music-hall singer in "L'illusionniste" is any nearer the real thing than Miss Kelly's masquerade already referred to. It is not a matter for praise or blame, but merely one of fact, the difference is so fundamental that no amount of cleverness can get over it. No English girl, for instance, could reproduce Mlle Yvonne Germaine's two-minute part in the Paris street scene at the Queen's Theatre.<sup>1</sup>

A play like "Daniel" brings us face to face with the problem in its acutest form. "Daniel" deals chiefly with the favourite French subject of parental control in marriage. It raises questions and produces situations which would be impossible in England. It is translated into idiomatic English (and to the excellence of Mrs Harris's translation I take this opportunity of paying a rather belated compliment). Therefore you have an anomaly: your characters are

<sup>1</sup> Hereby hangs a tale. A few days after this article had been published I received a letter from Mlle Germaine's father—an English major living in St John's Wood. He told me that his daughter was of pure English descent, and her real name was anything but Gallic.

It was distinctly one to the lady, and a dreadful warning to me not to be quite so cocksure for the future. But it does not invalidate my argument. Miss "Germaine" is what horticulturists call a "sport". She has a peculiar faculty for imitating French ways and speech. I have it on her father's authority that from the very first time she ever set foot in France she was accustomed to be taken for a native by natives. So that I can claim this lady as an exception which, if it does not prove the rule, at least does not impugn its authority.

But what a piece of bad luck that I should pick her, out of all the French girls I have seen, to illustrate a point!

seated in a French garden, and they talk (for instance) about the Eiffel Tower being only thirty-seven miles away, and yet they use such phrases as "talking a lot of rot" The question now is, ought these people to look English and behave like French people, or to look French and talk like English people? The actress, or the producer, has to decide whether it is more anomalous to sit in Paris looking as if your name ought to be Miss Middleton and pretending it is Suzanne Girard, or to look like Suzanne Girard and adjure your relations not to talk a lot of rot

It is a choice of evils If you were really successful in looking like Suzanne, your English idiom would sound like a quotation from a foreign tongue, while if you looked like Miss Middleton some critic would be bound to lay sarcastic emphasis on the fact In "Daniel," as a matter of fact, the second method is adopted Miss Alexandra Carlisle, Miss Alice Moffat, and Miss Edith Evans are all perfectly English The only logical supposition which could account for these three ladies being within thirty-seven miles of the Eiffel Tower would be that they had taken a house there in order to get the benefit of the high rate of exchange On the whole (though, as I have said above, I rather shrink from trying to solve the problem) I think I prefer it this way Certainly it comes as rather a shock to find the feather-headed lady played by Miss Evans calmly disposing of her daughters to eligible but unsuitable young men whom they do not love, and also to see so modern a product as the daughter played by Miss Moffat driven to subterfuge in order to circumvent her mother But it would come as even a greater shock if I found a lady

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with the manner and gesture of Mlle Printemps casually telling people not to talk "rot," and pronouncing the "r" without a trace of the Parisian trill

After all, language and gesture are inextricably bound up together. A really inspired linguist—one of those people who collect languages by the dozen, as other people might collect stamps or butterflies—is rare. I have known two, and in both of them was the same peculiarity to be noticed, that each language in the speaker's repertoire had its appropriate set of gestures, and its appropriate expression of face. Each of these two men (they were both Englishmen, by the way) had the faculty while they were speaking a particular language of thinking, feeling, and—as it were—moving in that language. Neither of these men were actors. Both, as it happened, were educationists. But the instinctive sense of rightness that made them assume the gestures with the tongue is the same instinct that makes the actress able to work herself "into the skin" of her part.

According to this argument, if an actress speaks her part in the ordinary English of everyday life she will naturally look and feel English, just as, if she were acting in pidgin-English, she would expect to look and feel Chinese, and if she were acting in Cockney would expect to shed her drawing-room manners and wear a large hat with feathers. Carry this to its logical conclusion, and we arrive at the decision that in order to make French plays quite convincing in English all the players should speak the kind of English which French people use—which, as Euclid used to remark in triumphant tones when he

had got himself purposely into this kind of tangle, is absurd

The problem has, therefore, no solution, unless you are prepared to accept as such a sweeping reform by which no French or other foreign plays are to be translated at all unless they deal with subjects which admit of the scene being transferred to England and the characters Anglicised. In other words, no plays at all must be translated, but such as will bear it may be rewritten in English. (In the case of "Daniel," for instance, the adapter would have to find a new motive for the plot which Suzanne, now to be definitely transformed into Miss Middleton, enters into with Grainger. As it stands, it would not ring true in an English version, but with a very little alteration the whole play could be made quite convincing enough for its scenes to be transferred to, say, High Wycombe and London. We have neurotic young men, ambitious mammas, and jealous but preoccupied husbands on this side of the Channel in plenty.) But such a reform would, of course, be much too drastic to be tolerated, it would rob us of just those plays which we need to see on our stage to enable us to appreciate French problems and French points of view, and so we have to fall back on the choice of compromises open to us. We have to accept, as a matter of convention, that a woman on the stage is a Frenchwoman when our senses plainly inform us that she is nothing of the kind—and we have to wait, if we want thoroughly to enjoy French plays, until we get an opportunity of seeing them acted in French.

—21st January, 1921

## AN AMERICAN PROBLEM

A VERY bad and slipshod convention is gradually coming into being on the London stage, by the terms of which American and English are held to be one and the same language. One they may be, the same they certainly are not. Yet when an American play is put on in London it really seems to be a matter of individual choice whether each actor or actress will adopt an American accent or not, and it is quite time for something to be done about it.

Theoretically, the right course is absolutely plain, in practice it has difficulties. But let us deal with the theory first, and see what the practical difficulties look like as they arise. The broad principle ought to be, without a doubt, that a play depicting American life ought to be played not only in American, but in the right kind of American according to the State or city in which the scene is laid. I was once told by a Canadian officer, for instance, that Mr George Tully's accent in "The Man from Toronto" was not only correct Canadian, but correct Torontian (or Torontese). As to the truth of this I must take my Canadian informant's word, but that is undoubtedly the kind of achievement at which every English actor cast for an American part ought to aim—in theory.

Now for the difficulties. One is that while the better actors might find themselves quite able to cope

with such a task the rank-and-file might not, and the horrible travesty of an accent which some of our less experienced actors and actresses might hand us as American is a thing fearful to contemplate. But this is an unworthy objection, which I mention first merely in order to put aside. Our stage is so thronged with clever people that any glaring failure in such a matter should be attributable only to miscasting. Once it had been laid down as an understood principle that plays supposed to take place in America must be spoken in American there would be no difficulty in finding people to do so—at least, it would be a disgrace to our stage if there were.

Then there is another objection. It seems to be accepted as a truism among those who cater for the general British public (editors, theatrical producers, and film exhibitors all alike) that that public cannot enjoy American work unless it has been to some extent camouflaged. As a result, we see everywhere, in our magazines, on our stage, on the screen, stories purporting to describe life in London or the English provinces, when it is only too plain that the authors have never even seen England in their lives. Camouflage of this kind in a book or a spoken play could only be made effective by a thorough revision of the entire text. But if it is not effective it is worse than useless, because it is merely irritating.

A friend of mine who is an inveterate magazine reader (but has a very exact literary taste for all that), recently amused himself by taking four current periodicals at random and making a list of purely American expressions or references found in supposedly English stories. His list assumed such



proportions that he offered it to various London editors (not, of course, the delinquents) for publication. No one would print it—fearing, I suppose, to cast the first stone. Exactly the same thing is going on on the stage, with equally irritating results. Take, for instance, the freshest instance, “The Charm School,” at the Comedy. Here you have a silly but amusing play, written by an American for the American public. Somebody realises that the chief male part is excellently suited to Mr Owen Nares, and the necessary arrangements are made. The producer has then four courses before him:

1. He can bring out the play as an American play, keeping the original setting, in which case Mr Owen Nares will have to talk with an American accent, and nobody can be engaged to act in the company who is not capable of doing the same.

2. He can arrange with the author for the play to be properly Anglicised, that is, virtually rewritten, as would be the case with a version of a French play.

3. He can do what was done in another play at the Comedy, “Will You Kiss Me?” That is, keep the original setting and let the actors do as they like about accents, with the result that some speak English and some American.

4. He can do what he actually has done in the case in point—alter the scene of the play to England, play it in English, amend (perhaps) some of the more glaring Americanisms, and trust to luck that the others will not be noticed. The result is that in this particular play we start off in an alleged Bloomsbury, where young men keep house together in a subtly un-English manner and talk American slang (e.g., “You

said something that time! ") in expensive British accents We then move to a girls' school such as no English schoolgirl ever entered, where the excellence of the telephone system alone is sufficient to brand its nationality upon it A girl runs away to a place so remote that, having missed the last train, she has to be driven forty miles across country as the only way of getting her home (I should like to know where in England this could take place—especially within reach of London ) This journey, in addition, is accomplished in a " buggy "

Now I admit that I would rather hear Miss Sydney Fairbrother, Miss Meggie Albanesi, and Mr Nares talking their native English than overworking their unaccustomed noses with acquired American Consequently, given that Mr Nares is to appear in " The Charm School," I consider the second of my four choices to be the best, provided, of course, that the consent of the author had been obtained It would mean a good deal of trouble In fact, it might quite possibly be found impossible in the end to Anglicise this play without taking it completely to pieces and building a new play on the same foundations The next best thing, if we cannot have it consistently English, would be to keep it consistently American As it is, it is an anomaly

It happens that the Comedy stage has recently seen several American light plays, each of which has been anomalous in some way First there was " Why Marry? " a play on a topic so American that it was only of interest to Americans It was played by an English cast, and with one or two intermittent exceptions, in English accents—except that the leading

lady *was* American and behaved as such. Then we had "The Ruined Lady," to which the same remarks apply. One or two of the characters (the chorus girls, for example) were so American in conception and speech that any attempt to play them in English would have been madness. But, with the necessary rewriting of these parts, this play could have been Anglicised quite effectively.

After this there was "Will You Kiss Me?" in which (as already mentioned) no definite rule was followed. But it was plainly and obviously so American a play that not even complete rewriting could have made it English, and it ought to have been acted in American. I seem to recall that there was some attempt to explain away some of the English accents by educating the possessors in this country. Certainly Mr Donald Calthrop's character had been a Rhodes scholar, and I think I remember hearing Miss Marjorie Gordon mention a school in England. But that kind of explanation will not do. Any Oxford man will tell you that the Rhodes scholars from the U.S.A. successfully resist all the 'Varsity's attempts to vitiate the purity of their native speech, and I should be very much astonished if the girls' schools had not a similar tale to tell. The problem cannot be solved that way.

It will no doubt be obvious that all the plays I have here cited as examples are very light in texture, without any claim to rank as literature. Of course, when the question is one of high comedy or tragedy, plays depending on character rather than situation, and dealing with American temperament and ideals, then there is only one course possible. The play becomes

a picture of American life, and should be made as exact as it can possibly be <sup>1</sup> This is a very big subject, of which I am very conscious that I have only skirted the fringe, but this much at least seems certain—that our first need is consistency Certainly that convention of which I began by speaking should go by the board—a convention which allowed Miss Marjorie Gordon, speaking the purest English, to be accepted as a damsel of Fifth Avenue, and, conversely, permitted so obviously American a girl as Miss Georgette Cohan to be cast for that most English of parts, Dinah, in “ Mr Pim Passes By ”

—27th January, 1921

<sup>1</sup> Against this view may be set the striking example of “ Abraham Lincoln ” But Mr Drinkwater is careful to explain, in a note prefixed to his play, that his concern is to portray the character of Lincoln, not American life “ I have written as an Englishman,” he says, “ making no attempt to achieve a ‘ local colour ’ of which I have no experience, or to speak in an idiom to which I have not been bred ”

## THE STRATFORD FESTIVAL

ONCE the celebration of the actual birthday is over, and the formidable array of famous people who officiate thereat has departed, Stratford resumes its customary calm, and there is little to show that the festival is proceeding. Only by the rows of flagstaffs in the main street, and by the astounding number of small shops and cottages which advertise their desire to store your bicycle and regale you with ham and eggs and still lemonade, could you tell you were in a "show place." Except, of course, for the theatre, which seems to be the only scene of real activity.

You do your theatre-going under truly rural conditions at Stratford. At no other theatre with which I am acquainted can you wander out during the interval on to a green lawn, nor, elsewhere, can you spend that interval criticising the style of a ciew of local young men who are attempting to witch the world with noble oarsmanship. There is a river, it is true, which runs nearly as close to the Savoy and the Playhouse as the Avon does to the Memorial Theatre. But the Thames at Hungerford Bridge, beautiful though it is, has an air of being intended primarily for use. The Avon at Stratford is obviously put there purely for ornament and pleasure. The local crew, blissfully unconscious that they are not getting their hands away quickly enough to please

one casual observer at least, disappear round the bend. A family barge proceeds jerkily upstream, stroked by an incredibly small boy, whose mother is rowing bow when she thinks of it. In a punt a "gentleman is seen With a maid of seventeen, A-taking of his *dolce far niente*," while—however, I didn't come to Stratford to describe the life of the town, but its drama.

But the atmosphere of Stratford has an important bearing on dramatic criticism conducted within its confines. Insensibly, it mitigates the critic's professional ferocity, and makes him less captious and less demanding. I am vaguely aware that for some reason I can enjoy performances by the New Shakespeare Company in the Memorial Theatre which I should probably find much less satisfactory in London. I realised this particularly at the opening performance of "The Merry Wives of Windsor." I enjoyed myself thoroughly, but if I were to see it done in exactly the same way, gesture for gesture, at a London theatre, I think I should feel rather less pleased. To a great extent, no doubt, this impression is due to mere mechanical difficulties, such as lighting, stage-room, inexperienced stage hands, and so on, which one gets into the habit of discounting at provincial theatres but would expect to be automatically put right in London. But I think there is more to it than that.

There is a certain lack of finish and precision about the work of the company at present which keeps it below the London standard of acting. The same thing was noticeable last year, and perhaps it is owing to the very numerous changes in the personnel of the company that improvement has not been made.

After all, the chief asset of a repertory company is team-work. Good team-work gives just that finish and precision which is wanted here, and it cannot be attained if the members of the team are being constantly changed. I am not saying that this year's team is weaker than last year's, indeed, in many ways I think it is stronger. But it is different. So far as I have had the chance of judging, Mr Bridges-Adams has got out of his material this year results just about as good as he got last year, but if he had had a more permanent company he ought to have been getting still better results by now. There is no sense in crying over spilt milk, but it is to be hoped that the same process will not continue indefinitely. If the New Shakespeare Company is to be of the lasting value which was hoped at the time of its formation, it will want a more permanent nucleus than it seems to possess at present.

And now let me return to "The Merry Wives." As I said, I enjoyed myself thoroughly. It is not one of the plays over which it is possible to raise more than a moderate enthusiasm, it is too obviously written to order for that. Falstaff is good fun, but not the best fun. Justice Shallow is a poor, pale ghost of what he was in "King Henry IV." Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym all seem many per cent under proof. But, leaving aside comparisons, this story of the "fat knight in love" went ahead merrily enough. Most of the acting was good, and much was excellent. Falstaff was in the hands of Mr Baliol Holloway, and exceedingly safe hands they proved to be. Mr Holloway's make-up was superb, but the best point about his Falstaff was the old villain's submerged but

unmistakable breeding Mr Edmund Willard, as Ford, was equally excellent, his suspicions of his wife's honesty, and his furious jealousy, were done with splendid intensity I was a little afraid once or twice that he was going to cross the narrow dividing-line between fury and rant, but he made no mistake I liked Mr Arthur Keane's quiet and unforced humour as Slender, the actor allowed all the points to make themselves, stressing nothing—and missing nothing Of the rest, Mr George Zucco put any amount of spirit into his acting as the fiery French doctor Caius, Mr Ronald Simpson was a hearty, good-tempered Page, and Mr Maurice Colbourne did all that was necessary as Fenton The Bardolph, Pistol, and Nym I did not particularly care for, even with the small chances they get in this play, more might be made of the parts Miss Dorothy Green was a very attractive and spirited Mistress Ford, and Miss Margaret Scudamore was a good foil to her as Mistress Page Miss Gwen Richardson was a very sweet Anne Page, she has a very strong likeness in appearance and sometimes in manner to Miss Gertrude Elliott

On the next night the play was “ King Richard III ,” so that no completer contrast could be desired between two consecutive plays As before, the success of the production rested rather on half a dozen outstanding performers than on the team-work of the whole company Naturally, the play, being what it is, must depend chiefly on the actor who takes the part of Richard Crookback Here again Mr Baliol Holloway bore his responsibilities lightly His Richard was a very conscientious and impressive piece of work, consistent and well thought out, and lacking



only in the magnetic quality of charm which Richard must have possessed to make his strange career possible. Once more Mr Edmund Willard, in an unusually villainous version of Buckingham, gave splendid support. And, again, the playing of the smaller parts varied between a very high standard and quite a poor one. Miss Margaret Scudamore was impressive as her namesake, the Cassandra-like Queen of Henry VI. Miss Dorothy Green made the Lady Anne a pathetic figure, and Miss Gwen Richardson, having been rather unsuitably cast for the strongly emotional part of Elizabeth, Edward IV's Queen, made a courageous attempt which only just failed to carry conviction. The "Princes in the Tower" were very attractively played by Miss Natalie Moya and Miss Vivienne Bennett. The latter particularly has a very charming stage presence, which made me regret that my choice of plays prevented my seeing her in anything but a tiny part, which gave me no real chance of finding out what she can really do.

Mr Bridges-Adams's very striking pictorial sense has not failed him in these two productions, several of his groupings and settings remain in my mind with a very lively pleasure. But I did not care for his handling of the (admittedly very difficult) ghost scene at the end of "Richard III." The division of the stage into two cubicles (in one of which sits Richmond, and in the other Richard) is a mistake, I am convinced. The effect should have been obtained by lighting alone. The result of the present arrangement—in which the ghosts file past the two tents in a long, orderly train, stopping at the entrance to each tent to make their speeches—was to remind me

frivolously but forcibly of the food queues of the war period. In consequence, the whole effect of that scene, which ought to be made really impressive, was dissipated and lost. Taking it altogether, the work of the New Shakespeare Company is very interesting and sincere, and full of promise, which will be fulfilled if the company can be kept together. Its work inevitably challenges comparison with that of the Old Vic. The production and settings at Stratford are certainly better conceived than anything that the Waterloo Road house can show, but for team-work and acting ability the Old Vic has it nine times out of ten.

—28th April, 1921

## THE COURT IAGO

As it happened, when I went to the Court Theatre, I had never before seen "Othello" on the stage. Considering the number of revivals of that particular play that there have been during the last few years, it is rather a coincidence that I have missed them all. But so it is. On the other hand, besides knowing the text of the play tolerably well, I have read an enormous amount about it, remarks on the merits of the play from points of view so different as those of Mr Shaw in his *Saturday Review* days and Professor Bradley in "Shakespearean Tragedy," and appreciations of actors in the name-part from G. H. Lewes on Salvini to modern critics on Grasso. As a consequence, I could not do what would have delighted me—go to the play as if it were a new one and see how it would affect me. I had to go with my mind already made up how, in my own opinion, the characters ought to be played. But there was one thing which I was able to do at the Court which I shall now never be able to do again. Seeing the characters in the flesh for the first time, I was able to compare the actors' conceptions of Shakespeare's meaning directly with my own, without being disturbed by memories of how this or that other actor had played the part. The result was interesting, because the whole play seemed to be thrown out of gear and

rendered quite incredible by one piece of acting which was, according to its interpreter's conception, a consistent and meritorious piece of work. I mean Mr Basil Rathbone's Iago.

It is on the subject of Iago that Mr Shaw and Professor Bradley exhibit a sharp divergence. In the formula of the Hyde Park heckler, what did Mr Shaw say in 1897? "The character defies all consistency. Shakespeare, as usual, starts with a rough general notion of a certain type of individual, and then throws it over at the first temptation. Iago begins as a coarse blackguard, whose jovial bluntness passes as 'honesty,' and who is professionally a routine subaltern, incapable of understanding why a mathematician gets promoted over his head. But the moment a stage effect can be made, or a fine speech brought off by making him refined, subtle, and dignified, he is set talking like Hamlet, and becomes a godsend to students of the 'problems' presented by our divine William's sham characters." In spite of this characteristic dictum, Professor Bradley, representing the students referred to, published seven years later a brilliant analysis of Iago's character, which (as it occupies thirty-one large pages) I can hardly quote here, but which demonstrates that the character does not defy consistency quite so successfully as Mr Shaw might lead you to suppose.

I have mentioned these two opposing views at some length because I want to take as an accepted axiom one of the few points on which they are in agreement—that is, Iago's outward appearance and manner. "A coarse blackguard," says Mr Shaw, "whose jovial bluntness passes as honesty." Dr Bradley, allowing

for the difference of style, says the same thing " His manner was that of a blunt, bluff soldier, who spoke his mind freely and plainly He was often hearty, and could be thoroughly jovial ' Honest ' is the word that springs to the lips of everyone who speaks of him "

Now I can lay my hand on my heart and swear that " honest " is the very last word that springs to my lips in speaking of Mr Rathbone's Iago In fact, I feel that if I met him (the Iago, not Mr Rathbone) in real life I should disapprove of him as strongly as the people in the " Happy Hypocrite " did of Lord George Hell Like them, whenever he entered a room where I happened to be, I should " make straight for the door, and watch him very severely through the keyhole " I should never believe a word he said, unless I had independent evidence that it was true, and I should, with the utmost confidence, do the exact opposite of anything he advised me Feeling as I do about him, what am I to think of the other characters, who seem to have entered into a perverse conspiracy to regard this obvious " wrong 'un " as a very type of honesty? Othello is a great general, and should be a judge of men But when he begins to grow jealous of his wife on the strength of a tale hissed into his ear by a lean, Mephistophelian person, to whom lying is obviously a hobby, I lose faith in Othello He may be a general, but I cannot believe him a great one, and his recall at the end of the play strikes me as being a good thing for Venice, instead of a national blunder. The only misgiving I have about the future governance of Cyprus is that Cassio, who is to take Othello's place, is equally undiscerning

Then there is Desdemona At the first real hint of trouble she promptly sends for Iago, confides in him, and asks him to intercede with Othello I confess that this is a little less incredible, on the accepted theory that women often fail badly to discriminate between decent men and the reverse, and certainly this Iago has both charm and good looks But the same excuse will not serve for Emilia She must be a stupid woman under any circumstances, never to have gauged her husband's character, and to play so unquestioningly into his rascally hands But with Iago such an obvious villain, either her stupidity devolves into sheer idiocy, or else she is an accessory to Iago's schemes Both alternatives being impossible in view of Emilia's outburst when the purpose for which Iago wanted the strawberry-spotted handkerchief becomes known, Miss Mary Grey is left high and dry during the scene where Emilia, after finding the handkerchief, hardly utters a protest when her husband snatches it from her Her conduct being incredible, the actress has to give up as a bad job the idea of making it comprehensible She simply lets Iago have the handkerchief according to the instructions of Shakespeare's stage directions, and leaves you to make what you can of her motives

If, instead of being a lean, handsome Mephistopheles, Iago were the bluff, blunt soldier demanded by Mr Shaw, Dr Bradley, and the text, all would be well Given a sturdy, frank, blue-eyed, fair-haired Iago, with a passion for the truth exuding from every pore, and that way of looking you straight in the eye which all habitual deceivers rely upon as their most effective weapon, I am sure that the play would take

shape again at once Othello's right to be a real general in the field (rather than a discredited one in a sinecure at home) would be vindicated, and his claim to knowledge of what "in a false disloyal knave Are tricks of custom" would no longer invite a scornful laugh Emilia would become a consistent character, a stupid woman with a good heart, but (as Bradley points out in an unconscious blank-verse line) "in minor matters far from scrupulous" Desdemona would be freed from the suspicion of not knowing a decent man when she saw him, and the same might be said of Cassio Only by such a Iago could the scene where Othello's jealousy is lit and fanned into a flame be made really convincing I lose all real sympathy with an Othello who could doubt on evidence so slight and coming from such a quarter

In fact, I think that Mr Fagan has miscast this most important part Mr Rathbone is an actor of talent and promise, but he is emphatically not the man for Iago The fact was brought home to me all the more forcibly because at the Court I had the Iago of my dreams before me on the stage, masquerading as Cassio Mr Frank Cellier's lieutenant is in manner, looks, and apparent character all that Iago ought to be In fact, he is almost aggressively so, since the more he is Iago the less is he Cassio Two important points about Cassio are that he is a mathematician and that he is a success with women The latter trait especially needs to be emphasised, in order to give added plausibility to Othello's jealousy But if you were to set Mr Cellier's Cassio an unexpected sum in mental arithmetic, I believe he would use his fingers as an aid to computation, and he is "a man's

man " from head to heel What is needed for this part is something much more of the latitude and longitude of—Mr Rathbone According to their conceptions, both these actors do sterling work But I wish that somebody had mixed the two parts up at birth, like the babies in " Pinafore " But possibly that is the explanation—perhaps somebody did !

—2nd June, 1921



## “ ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA ” AT STRATFORD

My reason for picking “ Antony and Cleopatra ” as the play best worth a visit in the Summer Festival at present in full swing at Stratford was that I had seen the production before. This is not really as silly as it sounds. It may be remembered that Mr Bridges-Adams produced it first at Oxford this spring, for the O U D S , and therefore, having seen his version done by amateurs, I felt that it might be interesting to see it done again under the same leadership by professionals. The comparison turned out to be every bit as interesting as I had hoped, and serves to illustrate once again most clearly how very widely different are the standards by which amateur and professional acting must be judged. As amateur shows go, the Oxford production was as good as anybody could ask for, better, in one or two important particulars, than anybody had a right to expect. In fact, it was a remarkable piece of work. As professional shows go, the Stratford production is a good all-round performance such as we have learnt to expect from the New Shakespeare Company. All things considered, perhaps the Oxford performance may be rated as high as the Stratford one, but judged by an absolute standard of criticism, the professionals were so far ahead of the amateurs that they made the play seem a different and far finer piece of dramatic literature.

This question of a shifting standard of criticism is a difficult one, which the critic finds himself for ever running up against. To be a critic involves—as Mr Walkley was at pains to prove recently, having been challenged on the point—the possession of a standard. Criticism is an expression of personal opinion, but it is only valuable in so far as that opinion has reference to a definite standard which the critic, unconsciously or consciously, fixes for himself in his own mind. Now, in one sense, that standard must evidently be invariable. It must not alter from day to day under the influence of outside things. Your critic's opinion of a play on a cold day after a beefsteak ought to be identical with his views on the same play in a heat wave after lobster mayonnaise. And if the lobster has disagreed with him, so that he is temporarily incapable of taking any but a jaundiced view of everything he sees, he should plainly state the fact in his criticism, or else make allowances for his liver while he is writing. He must do his best to ensure that his opinion shall not be one day the verdict of an impartial judge and on another the infuriated invective of one whose gouty toe has been trodden on.

So far his standard should be fixed. But surely it is absurd to require it to be further fixed so as to regard all plays and all performers from the same standard. A critic's duties carry him to strange places, he may see, for instance, “As You Like It” performed in the same week by a brilliant London company and by a company of schoolboys. Naturally, he will not judge them both from the same standard. He will judge each performance separately. He will compare the London company's work

with his idea of what a London production of Shakespeare ought to be, and he will judge the schoolboys by a mental comparison of their performance with those of other schoolboys. It is quite on the cards, therefore, that he may praise the work of the schoolboys and blame that of the London company. The immediate effect of this is that the schoolboys begin to think that they are born actors, and decide (to the horror of their pastors and masters) to go on the stage in a solid body.

In the first volume of Mr Shaw's *Saturday Review* criticisms is one in which he came face to face with just this difficulty. The occasion was a dramatic society's production of "Macbeth," which Mr Shaw had attended, and quite evidently enjoyed very much, but he started his criticism by making it quite clear that from the professional point of view the acting was thoroughly bad, and that there was not one member of the cast whom he recommended to go on the stage. This understood, he proceeded to deal with the acting in detail, whence it appeared that the actress who took the part of Lady Macbeth, judged by any other but the professional standard, had done very well, and Mr Shaw so far forgot his original sweeping statement as to prophesy that she certainly would go on the stage, and moreover, with hard work, would make an actress. Her name was, Lillah McCarthy. Now in this case Mr Shaw showed that it is quite possible to shift your standard and yet remain consistent, the one thing needful being that you should keep your reader in no doubt from what standpoint you are looking at any given moment.

After this lengthy digression upon a subject not without importance and, I hope, interest, I get back

to the discussion of the Stratford “Antony and Cleopatra”—from, I hasten to add, the strictly professional standpoint. On the whole, I thought it was the best of Mr Bridges-Adams’ productions I have yet seen. For one thing, his methods suit the play, with its enormous number of short scenes and its swift changes of time and place, most excellently. The story tells itself smoothly, we are translated from Egypt to Rome, Misenum, Actium, Athens, and back again smoothly and with no sense of incongruity. The settings do more than credit to Mr Bridges-Adams’ pictorial sense—though in this connection it is worth mentioning that the lighting is sometimes at fault, Cleopatra spoke at least one speech with a thick black shadow obscuring her face, while the whole of her body was bathed in light. The production as a whole is “slicker” than it was at Oxford, but that is only to be expected, because Mr Bridges-Adams has had time to develop his ideas.

What constitutes the real success of the piece as it is being played at Stratford is the acting all round, but particularly in the chief parts, and more particularly and especially in the part of Cleopatra. Miss Dorothy Green’s work as the Serpent of Old Nile is really quite out of the common. Certainly it is far and away the best acting I have seen done by any lady in the New Shakespeare Company since I have been in the habit of visiting Stratford. At Oxford the part was taken by Miss Cathleen Nesbitt, who is a delightful actress but quite unsuited to this particular rôle. Any detailed comparison between the two actresses would be unfair to Miss Nesbitt, for while she was miscast Miss Green could hardly be better suited. She has

exactly the majesty of style without which Cleopatra sinks to a petulant, spoiled child    In all her changing moods, Miss Green never forgets that she is a queen, and, what is more, she always looks a queen    Moreover, she has a fine voice which she uses to bring out the music of the verse    In this she is unequalled by any other member of the company except Mr Baliol Holloway, and to him, therefore, goes the other part in which good speaking is necessary before all else—that of Enobarbus    Mr Edmund Willard's Antony is not quite so happily conceived as either of the other parts, but for all that it is a good, honest, manly piece of work    I have not space to deal with the rest of the company, and so I must content myself with remarking that I have seen Mr Maurice Colbourne do nothing better than his Pompey, and that Miss Mabel Todd as Charmian and Miss Gwen Richardson as Iras are respectively better and worse suited to their parts than I have ever known them

—28th July, 1921

## ON SPEAKING UP

It is an unfortunate fact that at the present time, when the general level of competence in the theatrical profession is high, the general level in so important a branch of the art of acting as elocution should be undeniably low. Far too often, on the London stage, do you find an actor or actress who gives an otherwise unimpeachable performance letting the audience down by becoming inaudible, usually at the most important parts of the play. The actor's responsibility in this matter is a heavy one, a bad delivery of a single line may quite conceivably spoil the whole effect of the play for those of the audience who do not happen to have got seats near the stage.

A very striking instance of this occurred quite recently at the first performance of Mr Victor MacClure's one-act drama "Latitude 15 Degrees South" at the Little Theatre. The scene of this piece, you may remember, is the deck of a ship on the open sea. A storm is gathering, and a mysterious bell is heard. The strange sound works on the superstitious minds of the sailors, and an atmosphere of gradually increasing terror is worked up, at the height of which one man is knifed and another shot. Then comes the climax—the bell turns out to belong to a bell-buoy which has broken from its moorings in the Port of London, and has drifted the intervening thousands of miles. As the buoy drifts into sight one of the

crew points to it, and shouts to his comrades (and incidentally the audience) what it is. If that shout is not clearly audible, the whole point of the play is lost, for few members of the average audience would be able to recognise the drifting object for themselves. Yet at the first performance the actor to whom this line was entrusted allowed his voice to be drowned by the storm. Personally, I just caught the word "bell-buoy," and therefore managed to understand what the sentence was all about, but from behind me I heard a woman's voice saying, "What did he say it was?" and a man's answering, "Don't know, couldn't catch it."

And later on I read in a weekly paper an account of this play, in which the writer had obviously given the thing up as a bad job. "The expected typhoon bursts upon the doomed vessel, as some explanation of the mysterious bell is given by the skipper," was how this writer was compelled to phrase his account, and I sympathised with him, because but for my luck in catching the one important word I should have been in the same plight myself. This is by no means an isolated instance. Over and over again at plays produced recently have I heard my neighbour explaining to my neighbour-but-one what So-and-so has just said. It is very trying, and there was a caustic piece of satire on the subject in a recent number of *Punch*, but it is really So-and-so's fault rather than my neighbour's. I often find myself wondering, as by straining my ears I manage to catch the confidential remarks of somebody on the stage, how the people in the pit—and still more those in the gallery—manage to hear anything at all. Perhaps they don't.

They do not have the same problem in the more frivolous forms of entertainment. The back-chat comedian, for instance, has two ways of ensuring that no precious drop from the bucket of his wit shall be lost. To begin with, he shouts at the top of his voice, and he says everything which it is important that the audience should grasp many times over. "Do you know Teresa Green?" he asks his companion. "Do I," says the companion, rather pedantically repeating the question, "know Teresa Green?" "Yes, do you know Teresa Green?" "No, I do not know Teresa Green." "You mean to stand there and tell me you don't know Teresa Green?" and so on, until, when he is quite sure that we have got Teresa Green rubbed well into us, he goes on to elaborate his point that "*trees are green*." But these crude methods are debarred to the actor. He has before him the problem of trying to combine the tone and manner of the casual conversationalist with the carrying power of the public speaker. The problem may be difficult, but it has to be solved. There are too many people on the stage to-day who fail to solve it.

There are two fairly obvious reasons for the slipshod methods of speech on the present-day stage. Both reasons are fundamentally the same—a reaction from the more precise methods of earlier generations. The first of them is the modern overdone and largely mistaken cult of realism on the stage. In the old days elocution was taught as an art, much as rhetoric was among the ancient Greeks. An actor on the stage was expected to use, and knew that he was using, a different speech and pronunciation from those in use in ordinary life. He rolled his r's, and performed



strange feats with his diphthongs    Nowadays, we have changed all that    The actor on the stage aims at using exactly the same language as that of ordinary life    And here comes in the second reason, that the language of ordinary life has changed    Our fathers were much more precise in speech than ourselves    Where we are colloquial, they were dignified (pompous, we call it when justifying ourselves), where we are slangy, they were merely colloquial    And the natural result is that where they were formal and particular in their pronunciation, we are inclined to be careless, to slur over sounds—in fact, to be indistinct    And this indistinctness is faithfully reproduced on the stage by enthusiastic realists who imagine that the authentic speech of real life will still sound like the speech of real life when it is spoken on the stage    But it does not

Indistinctness and sloppy articulation do not so very much matter in ordinary life, for two excellent reasons    You are talking to somebody quite close to you, and if he doesn't hear what you say he can make you repeat it    But from the stage you are addressing yourself to the man in the back of the pit or the top-most row of the gallery, and if he can't hear what you say, he must imagine it as best he can from your gesture    The plain fact is that the actor's first and most pressing duty is to make himself distinctly heard everywhere in the theatre    Without this, all his work goes for nothing, and, which is sometimes more important, all the author's work goes for nothing as well    But besides this rather negative reason for good speaking on the stage, that without it there is (for the man at the back of the pit) no play, there is a far more potent positive reason

The most powerful weapon in the actor's armoury is his voice. It is with his voice, far more than his appearance or his gestures, that the actor moves the emotions of his hearers. When Mr Jones, of Brixton and the City, reads an article by some prominent politician in the *Sunday Something-or-Other* he does so with a certain amount of critical interest but with little emotion. But when that politician explains those same facts in a public speech the effect on Mr Jones is markedly different. His eyes flash, his nose pants, his chest protrudes—in fact, he goes through all the emotional gymnastics laid down by Captain Corcoran for that soaring soul the British Tar. Mr Jones goes home to Brixton thanking Heaven that the ship of State is manned by beings of such transcendent powers. That effect is not produced by Mr Jones's awestruck admiration of the politician's personal beauty—at least, not in the case of most orator-politicians whose names jump to the mind. It is produced simply by the fact that the orator is gifted with a persuasive voice which he has learnt how to use. And it is this weapon, and this power over the emotions of men, that an actor who is satisfied with slovenly diction is deliberately putting behind him. There are a good many people on our stage who might do worse than ponder the lesson of that old and improving tale of Demosthenes and the pebbles. Or perhaps, since Demosthenes is unable through no fault of his own to provide them with an object-lesson in clear enunciation which reaches everybody without perforating the eardrums of any, perhaps they had better ponder the elocutionary methods of some of the French actors we have had in London recently.

—11th August, 1921

## LITTLE MOMENTS OF GREAT MEN

Two or three years ago Mr Gerald Cumberland published an indiscreet but amusing gallery of unvarnished portraits, the subjects (or victims) being people of note whom he had met. The book was so successful that it became inevitable that its author would have imitators, and now one has come forward in the person of Mr Hesketh Pearson. His book is called "Modern Men and Mummies," and, since Mr Pearson was at one time an actor, the majority of his subjects are people connected with the stage in one way or another. Some of his essays are long, some short, all are exceedingly lively, but few have any but a passing interest.

The last sketch of all is of his prototype, Mr Cumberland himself, and its opening words strike me as being so aptly descriptive of Mr Pearson's own work that I simply must quote them. Here they are: "It is a pity that Gerald Cumberland doesn't stick to racy impressions of his contemporaries. He does that kind of thing so much better than the serious stuff he has attempted since." So far, of course, the paragraph relates only to its subject. It is the next two sentences that return upon their author like a boomerang. "Not that I think the personal sketches in his first book have any lasting value—he hasn't enough critical power for that—but they are at least entertaining, if rather hard on himself. He isn't half

as unpleasant as they make him out to be " Mr Pearson's sketches are also entertaining, and equally lacking in critical power He has a certain power of judgment, but he allows his satirical gifts to run away with that judgment He is at his best when he is being amusing—and rather daring—at somebody else's expense A great many of the most amusing things in his book are so merely because they are slightly malicious, and if they were less cleverly written their questionable taste would become rank bad taste

A passage in the chapter on Sir George Alexander illustrates this In 1916 Alexander was chairman, and Mr Pearson secretary, of the organising committee for the Shakespeare Tercentenary performance at Drury Lane The passage in question is an extremely lively account of the way in which the casting sub-committee went about its business It consisted almost entirely, you see, of people who themselves had strong claims to be allotted important parts in the play, which was " Julius Cæsar " To this situation, obviously brimming over with opportunities to the satirist, Mr Pearson devotes half-a-dozen most intriguing pages They are eminently readable, those pages, the subject evidently inspired the author to do his best But every word is coloured, first with Mr Pearson's personal liking or otherwise for each actor, and second, with his desire to be entertainingly indiscreet—to set down things in malice Even if every word of these six pages is true, the portraits which they make up are so one-sided as to become caricatures One's final impression of that committee is of a crowd of our chief actors sitting round a table and behaving like a party of conceited

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and ill-mannered children At the head sits Alexander in a halo (Mr Pearson admired Alexander), and at the foot Mr Pearson himself, taking down minutes with a lofty smile, thanking God he is not as other men, and thinking how useful all this will come in some day when he writes a book containing personal sketches, which (owing to his critical faculty) *shall* be of lasting value But I am sure Mr Pearson is not half so unpleasant as he makes himself out to be He has a little weakness for maligning himself Why, otherwise, should he set forth in such detail the circumstances under which, having scraped acquaintance with Stephen Phillips, he called him "a fat-gutted old beast"?

No, Mr Pearson is no critic He doesn't really know the meaning of the word Listen to this "Nowadays we are dreadfully afraid of superlatives That's because we don't know our own minds In all the best criticism it is only the superlative that matters But our self-styled critics don't write criticisms they write reviews And in reviews it is only the comparative that matters" This sounds very clever, but it turns out on examination to mean nothing If a critic knows his own mind, he naturally uses the positive about most things he criticises He keeps his superlatives for those rare occasions when he meets the real "only thing that matters"—that is, a superlative work of art to criticise Mr Pearson's obvious retort to this is that the "self-styled critics" do not recognise a superlative work of art when they see it, in fact, that they daren't use superlatives for fear of making fools of themselves Well, we all make fools of ourselves in different ways The man who insists

that geese are swans is just as big a fool as the man who is so flustered when he meets a swan that he thinks it must be a goose. The only man who comes well out of the business is the man who recognises swans as swans and geese as geese and says so—not by any means necessarily in superlatives. There is no reason to insist that a specially fine swan is the Archangel Gabriel.

We all know the man who isn't afraid of superlatives. We find him at his best and brightest in the small provincial papers, pouring out his artless enthusiasms over the "most magnificent spectacle" afforded by the local fête. And that brings us to the real reason why Mr Pearson can never be a critic—he is an enthusiast. He gets carried away, whether he is praising or blaming. His indiscriminate praise of Shaw, whom he admires, is all of a piece with his sweeping condemnation of anybody he chances to despise or dislike. Much of his chapter on Shaw is excellent stuff, but much is mere excited panegyric. Mr Pearson has not any trace of the true critic's gift of detachment, of unprejudiced judgment—which he is yet perfectly capable of recognising and acclaiming in Mr Lytton Strachey.

I notice that Mr Pearson's publishers are under no misapprehensions. On the wrapper which clothes the book they claim that Mr Pearson "throws the lime-light where it is least expected, turns it on humorously, maliciously, with Puck-like ingenuity, when the expectation of a complete black-out has led his victims to discard the mask." Exactly. The three important words here are "humorously," "maliciously," and "victims." In fact, Mr Pearson is not

a judge but an executioner    But he imagines he is like the logical Mikado who—as Pooh-Bah said—“ seeing no moral difference between the dignified judge who condemns a criminal to die and the industrious mechanic who carries out the sentence, has rolled the two offices into one ”

Now that I have got all that off my chest, I must in fairness admit that I enjoyed Mr Pearson's book immensely    He writes freshly and well, and he has mixed with his ink a touch of vitriol, which—especially when he is dealing with pretentious and self-satisfied third-raters—makes you chuckle, and find somebody to read the passage aloud to    Every now and then he loses his self-control, and lays his colours on so thickly that you say to yourself “ This is pure burlesque ”    The sketches of Mr Lloyd George and Mr Gilbert Chesterton are the most striking of these    You feel as you read them that the Prime Minister could only be as Lloyd Georgian as this on the revue stage    Personally, I may as well confess it, I have grave doubts whether Mr Pearson has ever spoken to either of these two eminent gentlemen in his life

It sounds, perhaps, a trifle ungracious to say that the one chapter in the book more likely to be of lasting value than the rest is the one on Mr Frank Harris    Ungracious, because in that chapter Mr Pearson draws almost entirely to one side, he tells his story through Harris's letters to him, and through Bernard Shaw's letters to him about Harris    Altogether, this is an uneven book, but there will be few people—except the victims—who will not enjoy reading it

—17th November, 1921

## ABOUT PLAYS





## STAGE DIALOGUE

IF you meet a rising young dramatist at lunch somewhere, and he—or for that matter yourself—happens to say something specially witty about the cold mutton, the chances are that he will make the first possible excuse for getting behind something and surreptitiously jotting down the witticism for future use. He may, if of coarse fibre, do it blatantly “By Jove!” he may say, “that will make a good line!” So down it goes, and when in due course you attend the first night of your rising young friend’s new play, you will be able to judge, from the use he has made of his (or your) stray flash of brilliance, what is his attitude towards dialogue—whether he is steeped in the bad old tradition which dates from the Elizabethan era, or whether he belongs to the modern natural school. To the former class of playwright a “good line” is a good line, to be put into the mouth of somebody or other to make the audience laugh, to the latter, the “good line” may be a very bad line indeed, unless it is put into the mouth of a character with whose habit of thought and method of expression it chances to agree. This may seem perilously like a truism, but it would have been rather an “advanced” statement only a very few years ago. It is really astonishing how modern an invention is

“ natural ” dialogue    Indeed, except for a very few sporadic instances, hardly any of which were outstandingly successful either as drama or as literature, it hardly goes back further than the middle period of the older contemporary dramatists, such as Sir Arthur Pinero and Mr Henry Arthur Jones <sup>1</sup> The reason for the change is not far to seek, up till quite recent times the stage addressed itself to a limited public, and was confined to a limited outlook. It dealt, indeed, with little more than the foibles, the amusements, and the adventures of the smart society of its day. Nowadays its public is bigger, more various in its tastes and its experiences of life, with the result that there is to-day scarcely any phase of human life which does not come within its province.

It was Lyly and the University wits of the time of Elizabeth who first established the tradition that the language of the stage should be cleverer, more full of colour and form, more epigrammatic than the language of real life. Shakespeare himself conformed to this tradition, though he succeeded—as he did with other even less malleable stage traditions of the period—in turning even its worst results “ to favour and to prettiness ”. This tendency to get away from nature was helped by Ben Jonson and the “ humours ” which connect themselves with his name. These characters were, indeed, less human beings than personifications of their own ruling passions. Then came the most artificial period

<sup>1</sup> The dialogue of T. W. Robertson represents the first tendency towards naturalness. It is, however, very far from being natural as we understand the term, though it may well have seemed sensationally so to the traditionalists of its own day.

in all the history of English drama The Restoration period produced a society so impregnated with the cult of pose, and the feverish straining after verbal wit, that the stage had perforce to follow suit In the comedies of Dryden, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and the rest there is scarcely a hero who is not a "wit" The possession of a carefully cultivated faculty for what Americans call "back-chat" was at this time held to make a world of vile, ill-favoured faults look handsome In Dryden's "*Marriage-à-la-Mode*," for instance, an erring wife returns to her husband—why? Because she discovers that "he hath wit" It is enough No other reason is necessary The mental strain of keeping up a coffee-house reputation in those days must have been worse than the agonies of a present-day comedian who has to maintain a name for impromptu "gagging" Later, the tension relaxed a little, as society became less childishly enamoured of verbal quibbles But the artificiality remained, showing itself especially in Sheridan, and reaching both its highest point and its end in the work of Oscar Wilde

In these two dramatists English dialogue is generally thought to have been seen at its most brilliant Certainly no modern writer has surpassed them But their brilliance is false It does not glow from within, it is applied from without, in the form of polish It illuminates not the characters, but the playwrights Think of any of the brilliant epigrams of Wilde's in "*The Importance of Being Earnest*" or "*Lady Windermere's Fan*" Some of them are quite unforgettable, but it is impossible to remember quite certainly who said them All that you can

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remember without any doubt is that Wilde wrote them. The reason is that any of Wilde's characters might say any of his epigrams, within certain obvious limits. They all move together on a plane higher than our workaday world, breathing the rarefied air of a wit which inspires them to the performance of mental and verbal gymnastics beyond our poor powers to imitate. We gaze at them with the same detached admiration which we accord to the boneless trapeze artistes of the variety stage. We do not aspire to do that sort of thing ourselves, but it pleases us to know that somebody can.

The dramatists of to-day have a different conception of dialogue altogether. Their aim, first and foremost, is to achieve the "imitation of life" which Aristotle defined as the object of drama. The rising young dramatist already mentioned, if he is to continue to rise nowadays, must be careful how he uses that mutton epigram. He must not drag the conversation round to it, he must wait till his characters happen to mention mutton—or, at least, meat. Even then he must not produce his epigram unless somebody with a turn for that form of wit happens to be on the stage at the time, and if his list of persons does not contain anyone of that description, the play must go muttonless.

Nearly two years ago, when Mr A. A. Milne's first full-length play, "Belinda," was produced, one critic remarked that it contained the most brilliant dialogue that had been written since Oscar Wilde. This judgment was doubtless intended, and everywhere accepted, as the highest compliment which that critic had it in his power to pay. The compliment is

deserved, but in so far as it hints at any similarity between the methods of the two writers, it is misleading. Mr Milne is not a great dramatist. There are some excellent judges who consider that as yet he lacks that essential sense of a dramatic situation without which he cannot become even a really good dramatist. But in this matter of dialogue he is eminent enough to be chosen as the champion of the "natural" writers against Oscar Wilde, or whom you will, and he and Wilde have only one quality in common—brilliance. It is, however, just in this quality that their chief difference lies. Mr Milne's brilliance does glow from within, it is not applied with a polishing-brush. His dialogue shines so that by it his characters illuminate themselves. If you transfer it from the mouth of one character to that of another, or take it from its context, it ceases to shine. For instance, one of the lines which scored most heavily on the opening night of "Belinda" was "Delia, never get married because your mother wants you to." By itself it is pointless. In its place in the play, it epitomises Belinda's whole character.

Wilde's dialogue, however, is just as brilliant in anybody's mouth, and with or without context. Almost every laughter-compelling line which Wilde wrote has this quality. For instance "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune, to lose both seems like carelessness." Or, from another play, "A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Wilde's epigrams have their intrinsic value, but they have little relative value. They neither help us to understand his characters, nor do they help him on with the develop-

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ment of his plot    In the matter of really dramatic dialogue, he could take lessons from practically any one of our present-day playwrights who has the slightest pretensions to be called successful

—18th March, 1920

## CURTAINS

THE history of the English stage bristles with examples of the innate conservatism of human nature—British human nature, at any rate. Of all these examples, possibly the most striking is to be found in the planning of the first regular theatres. Up till Elizabeth's reign, and for some time after she had ascended the throne, there was no such thing as an English theatre. Theatrical performances took place in inn yards, rudely fitted up for the purpose, and the spectators watched the play either from the yard itself or from the windows of the rooms which overlooked it.

This was all very well once in a while, but as time went on, and the stage began to assume real importance, a need sprang up for a building which should be maintained solely as a playhouse. With this end in view, first of all a disused monastery in Blackfriars was taken over and adapted, and very soon afterwards were built the first English theatres. It might reasonably have been expected that the actor-managers who designed these buildings, having been personally acquainted with the disadvantages of the inn-yard performances, would have taken this opportunity of making a real step forward and evolving something a little less ill-adapted to its object. But this is where the conservatism I have already alluded to comes in.



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Though we know little enough of the exact arrangement of these early theatres, we do know that they all conformed roughly to the accidental inn-yard model—much as the modern fives-court conforms to the purely accidental shape of its prototype, which is a portion of the chapel wall at Eton

In consequence of this, the stage in Shakespeare's theatre consisted of a large platform, which projected forward into the arena and effectually prevented any attempt at stage mechanism, and the only curtain which quite certainly found a place in the arrangements was one which screened off a kind of recess, or back-stage, behind the stage proper, which was used for such purposes as the play scene in "Hamlet" or the strangling of Desdemona in "Othello" It was probably the existence of this curtain, and the realisation of its possibilities, which led to the eventual appearance of the proscenium as we know it and the use of the drop-scene At the reappearance of the drama after its temporary submersion during the Puritan rule, we find that the Restoration theatres have a curtain which screens most, though not all, of the stage, and though the projecting part was by this time used only for the speaking of prologues and epilogues, which took place (as no doubt they would now if they happened to be still a part of our stage tradition) before the curtain, still there was considerable outcry raised against the first attempts to do away with it and make the curtain, when drawn, comprehend the whole stage

The change, though its results have been as gradual as itself, has had all the effect of a revolution To it, as much as to any other one cause, may be

assigned the increasing realism of the drama, both in writing, acting, and production. Although the Elizabethans refused to be bound by the iron conventions which made Greek tragedy a slave to the unities, yet they could only escape from those bonds by the sacrifice of all the scenic side of their art, and this is probably one reason for the immense popularity of the almost entirely spectacular masques of that time, the richness of whose setting was in strong contrast to the compulsory plainness of the theatre. Another important convention which was imposed upon Greeks and Elizabethans alike by the architecture of their theatres was the necessity of providing the characters as each scene drew to a close with a sufficiently plausible reason for leaving the stage. In street scenes and the like this could be managed without much difficulty. His conversation with Bassanio being finished, for instance, Antonio can quite naturally say—as they walk off together

“ Come on, in this there can be no delay  
My ships come home a month before the day ”

But, however deftly it is managed, we cannot help growing weary of the frequency with which a whole party must move from one room in a house to another, for no better reason than that the room, on their departure, must cease to be a room and become, say, a sea-shore. Look through Shakespeare with your mind on this one point, and you will be astonished to find how many times the verbs “ come ” and “ go,” or some equivalent elliptical phrase, such as “ Let’s away! ” occur in the last half-dozen lines of his scenes.

With the coming of the drop-scene, all that was

changed, and gradually there grew up a new method of ending scenes and acts—a method which, by a natural attraction, came to be known as a “curtain.” Even in Shakespeare’s time the need for a slight heightening of the interest at the end of a scene was felt, as often as not this need was supplied by making the last two lines of a blank-verse scene into a rhymed couplet—as in the “Merchant of Venice” instance quoted above. But with the drop-scene and the possibility of realistic scenery came the possibility of ending a scene, not with a “Let’s away,” but with a tense and dramatic situation. I am careful only to say that the possibility arose then, because that possibility was not realised until long afterwards. Even in Sheridan’s plays, written more than a hundred years after the Restoration, there is no real sign of any attempt at a “curtain.” Yet it can hardly be doubted that if he were writing to-day, the man who devised the “School for Scandal” and its screen scene would have been specially renowned for his effectiveness in this respect. Indeed, it is not altogether beyond the bounds of possibility that he would to-day put the fall of the screen itself at the end of that famous scene, instead of somewhere in its middle.

Once the practicability of this method of bringing an act to a close was generally recognised, its very great effectiveness—quite out of proportion to its relative importance in a play—soon came to be understood, with the natural result that after a time a “good curtain” became something of a fetish among playwrights. Soon it became equally a fetish among the play-going public, and by some it was even turned

into a rule of thumb whereby to test a play. It is a test rather after the manner of the "split infinitive" test in literature. Many amiable people go about saying that So-and-so has no claim to be called a stylist because he splits his infinitives. They believe passionately in their test, and may even enjoy something of a reputation for learning among simple people who do not know what a split infinitive is, but sooner or later they are bound to find out that some of the greatest of the acknowledged masters of English have split infinitives ruthlessly when it suited them. In the same way, many people are quite ready to believe that any play is a good play if only the curtains are effective, and, in fact, they give such undue importance in their own minds to the actual situation or line which closes an act that if this does not happen to please them they feel disappointed with the whole play.

The consequence is that in nearly all modern plays there is a very obvious effort on the part of the dramatist to reserve for his last line something startling or effective. If he is conforming with tradition he finishes, as it were, "with a click." If he is going against tradition he does so with a violence which produces the same effect. Two examples of this among this year's plays occur to me. Mr St John Ervine, in his brilliant but gloomy piece of realism, "John Ferguson," deliberately breaks the tradition. Each of his acts ends without any suggestion of a "curtain"—on the surface. One act, for instance, which has been crowded with emotion of one kind and another, ends with a question and answer on the subject of—the weather! But the effect is just as

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strong as though Mr Ervine had elected to end on a note of passion, for the contrast is so violent that it gives us a real shock. What is more, it epitomises—as a good curtain should—the whole spirit of the play, which teaches that even at moments of the deepest tragedy in our lives the world around us goes on unmoved, and even our own daily existence has to be carried on.

The other example is more recent. Mr H M Harwood, in "A Grain of Mustard Seed," makes his heroine, after uttering the sentence which tells her lover and the audience that she is now at last, in all sincerity, his for the asking, turn and walk out of the room before he has time to realise her meaning. By this deliberate avoidance of a situation towards which everybody in the audience had naturally supposed him to be working, the playwright attained an effect more startling, if less dramatic (or rather because less dramatic), than if he had let them take their course to the inevitable love scene.

There was a time—not so very long ago, either—when playwrights had a useful though horrible formula for providing any given play with a ready-made final "curtain." An example is provided by "My Lord in Livery," a one-act farce which has provided generations of amateur actors with a vehicle for stage expression. This play ends something as follows. The hero, a real, live lord, having successfully made love to the heroine in the plush and powder of a footman, pleads for forgiveness. "Well," she says, "I will forgive you, if"—and here she turns and addresses the audience with the air of one about to be really witty—"you, too, will forgive My Lord

in Livery! ” To-day this method is very properly discredited, but we came unpleasantly near having a specimen of it this spring in “ Just Like Judy ” In this play was a character known as “ Put-it-off Peter,” whose nickname occurred so often that I began to have a growing suspicion, in the first act, that the author was working up to a witticism of the “ My Lord in Livery ” type And, sure enough, the last curtain fell on Peter proclaiming that he was now “ Put-it-off Peter ” no longer

The worst thing that can be said of the “ curtain ” is that when it becomes a fetish it destroys realism, the dramatist, in fact, throws away realism to attain an effective close But if he is wise he does not sacrifice realism He simply arranges that his play shall reach its appointed climax and an effective line at the same time In this way Mr Ian Hay achieves at least one splendid and unforced curtain in “ Tilly of Bloomsbury ”, and nothing could be at once more natural and more effective than the line which both sums up and concludes Mr Galsworthy’s play, “ The Skin Game ” “ What’s the good of gentility if it can’t stand fire ? ”

—27th May, 1920

## ENGLISH AND AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS

THE theatrical season which has technically just drawn to a close has been noteworthy for at least one reassuring sign. Particularly in the last month or two it has seemed that the British playwright is coming into his own once more—and quite time, too. I suppose the war (which has taken the place of the old-time proverbial cat as being “at the bottom of everything”) was responsible for the swamping of our stage with plays from America. At all events, for the last few years our theatrical producers have appeared to believe that good plays were being written only on the other side of the Atlantic, and have given us a continuous stream of American “masterpieces” of widely varying merit.

Indeed, the theatrical magnates were fast becoming as much at the beck and call of the U S A as their younger brothers the cinema magnates. It began to look as though the noble army of demobilised British playwrights—all except a few established favourites—would have to go and help dilute the building trade or remain on the books at Horrex’s Hotel until Lord Haig’s appeal on behalf of “ex-officers and men of similar educational attainments” should have found them a livelihood. To-day there is a saner atmosphere. Producers are not reading every American play through rose-coloured spectacles. They have realised that because a play has scored a

big success in New York it is not necessarily certain to repeat that success in London. That was a lesson very plainly taught by the failure of "Tea for Three," "East is West," and "Why Marry?" Each of these three plays, I am informed, ran well in the United States. All three ran anything but well over here, in spite of the fact that in each of the first two cases one of our absolutely first-rank actresses had been secured for the chief part. Since the failure could not very easily be attributed to the acting, it followed that something must be wrong with the plays from the point of view of the English audience.

As a matter of fact, it is easy for us, speaking after the event, to see what that "something wrong" was. Two of the plays I have just mentioned dealt with distinctively American problems, which failed to have any but an academic appeal to an English audience, and a purely academic appeal is a dreadful disease for a would-be popular play to suffer from. Both "East is West" and "Why Marry?" had themes which were admirably calculated to intrigue Americans, who might conceivably find themselves in the same kind of fix themselves some day. But for the same reason they were certain to leave the average Englishman cold. The "colour bar" does not really mean very much to the man in our street, Chinese inter-marriage does not occur often enough in this country to be any kind of a problem, and consequently he is not so alive to the importance of Ming Toy's nationality as his cousins. Again, the difference between the divorce laws of the two countries makes any American play dealing with the anomalies of marriage dangerous for a British producer to handle. In our eyes both



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“ Why Marry ? ” and “ Over Sunday ” dealt with situations which were far too artificial to carry any interest

“ Tea for Three ” does not quite come into the same category It dealt with a theme which was, on the face of it, just as likely to intrigue play-goers here as in the States In fact, at the time of its production a London journal had only just finished the publication of one of those long correspondences so dear to the heart of the suburbs on the same enthralling topic, “ Should a Wife have a Man Friend ? ” So far, so good The author and the producer might well have flattered themselves that here was a topic to keep the pit crammed for months

But the solution of the question provided by the dramatist was reached by means of a piece of stage trickery which was bound to be utterly unconvincing to an English audience In America they are much more free and easy about some things than we are Mr Kipling once extracted a great deal of amusement out of an American railway owner who, wishing to get up to London quickly, stopped a big express by means of a red flag The company were scandalised out of their lives Such things might be done in strange new countries, but in England the railways were sacred institutions The American, on the other hand, could not understand why he should not take so simple a way of saving himself time and trouble In “ Tea for Three ” the producer overlooked a similar fundamental divergence of opinion In America it may be possible for an editor of a big paper to bring out a special “ spoof ” copy of his journal to oblige a friend and help him carry out an

elaborate practical joke, in England the Press is an institution just as much as the railway, and any responsible editor would have a fit if anyone suggested such a course of conduct to him. Yet, at the Haymarket Theatre, this play was supposed to take place in London, and we were asked to believe that this exact practical joke had been successfully engineered. It had the effect of making the whole play unconvincing, just as imperfectly disguised American stories in English magazines are unconvincing.

Of course, this is not to say that American plays dealing with America do not appeal to the public here. So long as the things which happen are comprehensible and convincing, the public cares very little whether the scene is laid in New York or London, Timbuctoo or Seringapatam. The success of "The Ruined Lady" shows this. It would probably be easy to translate this play into English so that nobody would detect its American origin, instead, Miss Lynd has very wisely chosen to keep its Long Island setting and atmosphere. But its main theme would be comprehensible in any language, and in consequence the public flocks to see it. "Come out of the Kitchen," again, is so American that any attempt to Anglicise it would be foredoomed, but its action is straightforward and clear, and in consequence its setting is

Besides those I have already mentioned, there have been half a dozen other new plays of American origin produced in London this season, including the latest of all—Mr Hawtrey's new venture at the St James's. Of the other five, three scored successes, two were failures, but in no case can their nationality be said

to have anything to do with their fate "Paddy the Next Best Thing" is an American play with an English-Irish setting, and taken from an English novel, the origin of "The Man Who Came Back" counts for nothing by comparison with its thrills, "One Night in Rome" was carefully nebulous about its setting, and owed its success entirely to the reputation of its leading lady. On the other side of the account, neither "Mr Todd's Experiment" nor "Madame Sand" were obviously American, and if they had been, they would probably have been withdrawn neither sooner nor later than they were.

The conclusion to which one comes is that the public has no prejudice either for or against American plays as compared with the home-grown variety. If it likes a play, it does not much care which country it comes from. That is a very simple attitude, and ought to lead to an equally simple attitude on the part of producers. The time when they could accept blindly American play after American play and be sure of a public has gone by, merit (of some kind) is now the test once again, and American and English playwrights are once more competing on absolutely level terms. During the present season there has been no play from the States which has rivalled in any way such great sentimental successes as "The Cinderella Man" and "Three Wise Fools". There is evidence now that the indigenous playwright ~~may~~ yet be rescued from the building trade, the last few weeks have introduced us to two new and promising English writers of light comedy. It is refreshing to see men like Mr Reginald Berkeley and Mr Noel Coward being given their chance and making such good use of it.

—26th August, 1920.

## MIRANDA

Not by chance did the heroine of "The Tempest" come by her name. In the stilted language of the Shorter Latin Primer the word would be translated, "A lady meet to be admired"—and that is what Shakespeare evidently intended her to be. When Ferdinand first learns her name his words seem to sum up the poet's own attitude towards this last of his created women.

"Admired Miranda"  
Indeed, the top of admiration"

In her Shakespeare seems to have been at pains to paint his ideal of womanhood.

Many plays of Shakespeare's time, and even more just after his day, have heroines so impossibly good that they go utterly beyond nature and beyond credibility. They are inhuman creatures, inhabiting an impossible world. Shakespeare's women are always human, always of their world, never idealised beyond belief or sympathy. Even Hero, of "Much Ado," whose long-suffering meekness makes her difficult for modern minds to find sympathetic, has a welcome touch of the minx in her which proves her to be of flesh and blood. Perdita and Imogen, who come nearest to Miranda in point of time, and are two

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of the loveliest of his creations, combine a rich humanity with their unspoilt charm. They know their world. Perdita, when complimented by Camillo,

“ I should leave grazing, were I of your flock,  
And only live by gazing,”

answers with the assured manner of a girl capable of taking care of herself

“ Out, alas !  
You'd be so lean, that blasts of January  
Would blow you through and through ”

And as for Imogen, there is not much of the good and evil of mankind that she is not acquainted with by the time we take leave of her. But in Miranda, by reason of the strange circumstances of her upbringing in a remote island, knowing no man but her father, Shakespeare had an opportunity to invent a character which, without straining the probabilities, should be one of sheer beauty unspotted from the world—a realised ideal. Prospero is often supposed in various connections to stand as a figure for the dramatist himself, and so here, when the banished Duke of Milan takes advantage of his exile to mould his little daughter's character—

“ Here in this island we arrived, and here  
Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit  
Than other princesses can, that have more time  
For vainer hours, and tutors not so careful ”—

we cannot doubt that he made her what Shakespeare, in like circumstances, would have had his own daughter be

Youth and freshness are Miranda's first attributes. She is fifteen. Twelve of those fifteen years have been spent on the island. She has no experience of

men, and her innocence in consequence has a completeness impossible to a dweller in the workaday world, but it is an innocence not founded on ignorance. Shakespeare had the good fortune to live in an age free from the blight of prudery, in which it was merely natural that everybody should know the facts of nature. Miranda discusses the circumstances of her own birth with her father with a frankness which the most up-to-date of our flappers would find impossible to emulate without self-consciousness. To us this may well be Miranda's most engaging quality. To a man of Shakespeare's time it would hardly seem a "quality" at all. To him innocence based on and consisting of ignorance would not have been innocence. He would assume as a matter of course that every sane person would grow up with an acquaintance with essential facts, and innocence to him consisted rather in the positive virtue of clean-mindedness than in the negative attribute (if you can call it so) of lack of knowledge. But Miranda herself puts this into words, it breathes through the whole scene of Ferdinand's declaration of his love.

“ Hear my soul speak,  
The very instant that I saw you, did  
My heart fly to your service, there resides,  
To make me slave to it, and for your sake  
Am I this patient log-man ”

MIRANDA

Do you love me ?

FERDINAND

O heaven ! O earth ! bear witness to this sound

I,

Beyond all limit of what else in the world

Do love, prize, honour you

MIRANDA

I am a fool

To weep at what I am glad of

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FERDINAND

Wherefore weep you ?

MIRANDA

At mine unworthiness, that dare not offer  
What I desire to give, and much less take  
What I should die to want But this is trifling,  
And all the more it seeks to hide itself  
The bigger bulk it shows Hence, bashful cunning !  
And prompt me, plain and holy innocence !  
I am your wife, if you will marry me,  
If not, I'll die your maid

When we first meet her, it is her quick compassion upon which the poet insists—that same “ quality of mercy ” which he has elsewhere extolled as being an attribute to God Himself Her first speech is an impassioned prayer to her father to allay the storm he has raised

“ O, I have suffered  
With those I saw suffer ”

This kindness and thoughtfulness for others is the quality upon which her whole character rests It is never unduly insisted upon, but it informs everything she says and does, and colours her relations with everybody in the play When Prospero is describing his banishment to her, how he and his infant daughter were committed to

“ A rotten carcase of a boat, not rigged,  
Nor tackle, sail, nor mast, the very rats  
Instinctively had quit it,”

her only thought is for him

“ Alack, what trouble  
Was I then to you ! ”

All of a piece with this is her tender solicitude over Ferdinand while he is forced to be the “ patient log-man ” Here, though her awakening love might

have brought with it the same compassion, we cannot help but feel that she would have sympathised in the same way had it been the drunken butler Stephano who had been thus treated, for she cannot understand unkindness. Prospero's assumed ferocity to Ferdinand hurts her, and she takes the first opportunity to discount it

“ Be of comfort,  
My father's of a better nature, sir,  
Than he appears by speech. This is unwonted  
Which now came from him ”

Even of Caliban, banished from Prospero's cell because he had sought to violate Miranda's honour and “ people the isle with Calibans,” she can find nothing worse to say than

“ 'Tis a villain, sir,  
I do not love to look on ”

To these qualities are added the modesty which she regards as “ the jewel of her dower,” and a dutiful obedience to her father's smallest word. Had Shakespeare drawn such a character in any of his other plays, she must have appeared spiritless and uninteresting. In a sense, Miranda is too good for this world, regarding “ The Tempest ” as a stage-play, this makes her a very difficult part to play, looking at it as a poem, she shines out as a wonderful jewel, only to be seen at its best in its appropriate setting. Shakespeare has made her, as Prospero describes her, a peerless being

“ Do not smile at me that I boast her off  
For thou shalt find she will outstrip all praise  
And make it halt behind her ”



## STAGE AND FILM TECHNIQUE

I WAS talking to a film-producer some time ago about the differences between stage-plays and screen-plays, when he uttered (from the enthusiastic play-goer's point of view) a damnable heresy. He said "Why do people write for the stage when there is the screen to write for? You have to waste such a lot of time over the technique of a stage-play that I cannot think why anybody takes the trouble to do it." His facts were sound enough, but his conclusions were horrible. It is true that the stage is the most difficult and the clumsiest medium for telling a story that exists, especially in these days of realistic and elaborate scenery, when an author is condemned to confine the action of his characters into four periods of forty minutes each, or three of fifty.

The novelist and the film-writer suffer from no such restrictions, they can change the scene as often as they like, they can pick out any isolated moments in the lives of their characters, and use them to carry on their story with a careless ease that must reduce the dramatist to helpless envy. And yet the dramatist has the laugh of them in the end, for, whatever his restrictions, his is the finest and most soul-satisfying way of telling a story when all is said. The creations of a novelist exist as shadows in the mind of his reader, those of a film-writer, as shadows on a

screen, but those of the dramatist exist as human beings, whom we can see speaking our language and thinking our thoughts. A film-play may be a genuinely beautiful piece of work, and may appeal powerfully to our emotions or to our imaginations, but it can never quite compete in either respect with the appeal of the stage-play. One reason for this is the invariability of the photographed version. You see, say, "The Admirable Crichton" on the film. Once you have seen it, you know all about it. You may want to see it again, but you know that if you do you will find it exactly the same, in every little particular, as it was the first time. But if you go twice to see "The Admirable Crichton" on the stage you know (even if your visits are made on two consecutive nights) that the two representations will be subtly different. None of the characters will be an exact replica of what they were the first time.

It is exactly the difference between hearing a gramophone record of a great singer and hearing the singer himself in the same song. One is mechanical, the other human. One is shadow, the other is substance. Even if, in the course of time, invention of new devices overcomes the present disabilities of the film, even supposing the gramophone and the use of colour-photography can be brought to such a pitch of perfection that the characters on the screen shall seem to speak and to have the complexion of life, even if the stereoscope can be employed to give an illusion of space and dimensions to the flat image—all this will not bring the cinema one step nearer to superseding the theatre. The more mechanically perfect the imitation becomes, the more inhuman it grows, Hans

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Andersen has told us what happens to people who prefer a mechanical imitation when they can get the real thing

The film-producer I mentioned forgot one thing The difficulty of stage technique is not a deterrent, but an incentive The dramatist has before him at once a higher and a harder task than the film-writer It is much more difficult to write a good stage play than a screen play of corresponding quality, but it is much better worth while when written Conversely, the ease and flexibility of the technique in writing for the film is a temptation to facile work Again "The Admirable Crichton" furnishes me with an example You may remember the use that Barrie makes, in the original play, of Henley's

"I was a king in Babylon  
And you a Christian slave"

It is a passage that lingers in the memory as a thing of sheer beauty When the film version came to be made, the adapter evidently felt that he was on his mettle to get just as fine an effect out of this passage in his own medium And, triumphant in his knowledge that while Barrie was bound to his stage setting, he (the adapter) could get to Babylon by candle-light—yes, and back again—he proceeded to insert into the fabric of his play a long Babylonian episode, a triumph of production, perhaps, but from the dramatic point of view a mere excrescence, and an artistic blunder of the crudest description

Realism on the stage is an impossibility The dramatist's aim is not so much to be like life as to look like life The film-writer, on the other hand,

can be as realistic as he pleases. In fact, all he has to do is to select the incidents in his characters' lives which are best for the purpose of illustrating his story. The dramatist has not only to select those incidents, but to rearrange them and the causes that led up to them in such a way that they can occur within the narrow confines of his three or four acts and yet appear plausible. How difficult this task is we can see from the melancholy corpses of once hopeful plays that we see lying all round us. Pity the poor dramatist! He finds it absolutely necessary for John and Mary to meet in the third act and make up their quarrel. The scene must, for half a hundred reasons, be laid in Mary's mother's drawing-room. How can John, having vowed never to see Mary more, be brought into that room? If the playwright simply says "Enter John," and leaves it at that, he knows that there are dozens of ferocious and ravening critics waiting to leap upon his neck. How can John be got into that room? Can he fall out of an aeroplane as he happens to be passing over the house and appear down the chimney? Or mightn't that be a little far-fetched?

Meanwhile, the film-writer is conscious of no difficulty. John is walking down a country road, he turns a corner suddenly, and cannons into Mary, knocking the parcels she is carrying into the roadway. Over the picking up of the parcels their hands meet—well, it's too easy for words, isn't it?

No doubt it was some such scene as this that my friend the film-producer had in his mind. To him all the time and the solid brainwork that must be spent in contriving a plausible way of getting John into Mary's mother's drawing-room is so much sheer

waste The mere idea of being held up by such trivial details irritates him But is it waste? I doubt it very much The difficulty is a spur to the dramatist's brain, however lazy he is, however lacking in a literary conscience, he is compelled to think his problems out He has to contrive a plausible way out of his awkward situation, and in order to be plausible he must avoid a solution that will make John or Mary do anything contrary to their own characters That is, he must get to know his John and his Mary well The film-writer can find a solution with a much more superficial knowledge of what his people are like After all, anybody can walk down a road!

The flood of inferior films that has been poured on to the market in the past few years is the strongest possible condemnation of an easy technique People without ideas, without knowledge of character, without—one would think—the smallest rudiments of taste or even education, have been able to get their miserable penny-novellite ideas filmed, if they had tried to cast their ideas in the form of stage plays their chance of being produced would have been about represented by that pleasant mathematical conception called "minus infinity" We have bad plays, heaven knows! But the badness of our worst plays is nothing like so bad as the badness of our worst films And for that, with all due respect to my film-producing friend, the stage has to thank its difficult and cumbersome technique

—17th March, 1921

## HISTORICAL PLAYS

HISTORICAL plays are queer things, unlike all other plays, and to the aspiring dramatist they must present at once a temptation and a warning. If you undertake to write a historical play you are, compared with your neighbour who sets out to evolve a play from his own inner consciousness, at both an advantage and a disadvantage. Your chance of producing something that is recognisable as a play is, perhaps, greater, but your chance of making a good play is smaller than your neighbour's. In a historical play, a very great deal of your work as dramatist has been done for you. In fact, history is the architect of your play, and you are merely the builder. Your design is provided for you, your materials are ready to your hand. All you have to do is to put those materials together in accordance with the design. "All" that you have to do—it is an ironic phrase. For you find that your architect has made his plans on the grand scale, with a fine disregard of questions of time and material, and you are expected to produce the same effect with a work on a tiny scale and in baser material. It is much as if somebody handed you designs for the Parthenon, and told you to reproduce it out of half a ton of red bricks and a pot of paint.

More than any other dramatic work, the historical

play emphasises the fact that complete realism on the stage is impossible and absurd, because the historical play is the only kind that attempts to reproduce on the stage not life, but lives—lives which have been actually lived. From your first scene you find that you have to choose between historic fact and dramatic expediency. Your characters are real men, and the things they did are recorded. You cannot substitute other events for those you find in the history, but you can, and indeed must, rearrange and mould those events to suit your own purpose.

Mr John Drinkwater says in his prefatory note to "Abraham Lincoln": "While I have, I hope, done nothing to traverse history, I have freely telescoped its events, and imposed invention upon its movement, in such ways as I needed to shape the dramatic significance of my subject." But however much you mould and telescope and invent, you come back and back again to the basic truth that facts are stubborn things, which do not take kindly to this treatment. Your hero—whoever he is—lived his life as it came, with no regard for dramatic conventions and requirements. The unities meant nothing to him. He performed his most significant actions at various ages, and in all climes from China to Peru, with a complete lack of feeling for you, the aspiring dramatist who are striving, many years later, to represent those actions upon the stage. How, having undertaken the task, can you evade your responsibilities? You cannot leave out this or that great event in your hero's life merely because it is inconvenient to get it into the confines of a play, because he is not only *your* hero. Other people know as much about him as you do, and

admire him as much, and your picture of him has got to conform to their knowledge and, if possible, amplify their understanding of his character. Your play must depend on two things—character and event, and in your handling of both of these elements you are handicapped by being firmly shackled to the facts.

The result is that a historical play cannot be handled with the same neatness as one in which the characters are the creations of the author, over whom he holds power exceeding that of life and death. In his effort to get on to the stage a story not shaped for that end, the dramatist must cast aside the rules of construction to which he would like to conform, and invent others which will suit his case. Particularly is this so on our present stage, with its realistic and elaborate settings. The problem scarcely worried Shakespeare, but if he were alive to-day and wanted to write "Antony and Cleopatra" he would scarcely be so light-hearted over questions of time and space as his own conditions permitted him to be. The third act, with its eleven scenes, and the fourth, with thirteen, gave their author opportunities of telling his story with a fullness and fidelity to historical fact possible in these days only to the writer of a film-play. Shakespeare was able to choose freely whether his chief preoccupation in any given play would be with character or event. The modern writer of a historical play for the stage is, to all intents, compelled by practical considerations to subordinate events to character. The chronicle-play is not possible in present conditions, but the restrictions actually help the character-play. In "Antony and Cleopatra" Shakespeare has combined his two ingredients almost



in equal quantities, in "Henry V," where he is interested first and foremost in the character of the king, we find him deliberately adopting the restrictions to which our own dramatists are forced to submit

There is a great structural similarity between "Henry V" and "Abraham Lincoln." In each case the dramatist has only one main object in view—the character of his hero. Both adopt, therefore, an episodic form. They do not make any attempt to make their plays continuous in the sense in which ordinary plays are continuous. They choose what seem to them the salient events of their heroes' careers, and make an episode, or act, out of each of these. Taken by themselves, these acts would not make either play into a connected whole, and in each case the same device has been adopted to obtain continuity. Chorus in "Henry V" and the Two Chroniclers in "Abraham Lincoln" work by slightly different methods, but to exactly the same end. Chorus picks up the thread of the plot at the end of each episode, and recounts briefly the events that take place between that and the next episode. The Chroniclers do much the same. But whereas Harry the King was a simple and downright man of his hands, whose actions were the best index of his character, Lincoln was a man of complex mind, whose greatness was shown, not in the world of action, but of thought. And so, while Chorus gives us a fairly detailed account of events, the Chroniclers link up scene with scene rather by analysing the mind of Lincoln, and by laying stress on the unshakable firmness with which he pursues his end. The effect in either case is the same, of giving a smooth continuity of thought to the whole.

The introduction of these extraneous beings converts a play, so to speak, into a framed picture. You are not allowed, even if you would, to capture the illusion that you are looking on at a piece of real life. Over and over again Shakespeare bids you remember that you are in the cockpit of the "wooden O," and that you have not got "a kingdom for a stage, princes to act, and monarchs to behold the swelling scene." You are reminded of this first in Act II

"The scene  
Is now transported, gentles, to Southampton  
There is the playhouse now, there must you sit"

And from there until the last act begins with the words

"Vouchsafe to those who have not read the story  
That I may prompt them,"

Chorus never misses an opportunity of insisting that the play is only a play. Much the same is true of the modern work. Mr Drinkwater uses his Two Chroniclers openly to direct our attention to those parts of his play which he considers the most important. The first words spoken are

"Kinsmen, you shall behold  
Our stage, in mimic action, mould  
A man's character"

The last words are

"Events go by And upon circumstance  
Disaster strikes with the blind sweep of chance  
And this our mimic action was a theme,  
Kinsmen, as life is, clouded as a dream

But, as we spoke, presiding everywhere  
Upon event was one man's character  
And that endures, it is the token sent  
Always to man for man's own government"

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The same method was used by Mr Hardy in "The Dynasts" This great epic-drama, with its nineteen acts and its one hundred and thirty-three scenes, and its magnificent conception of an overworld of spirits, was not intended for dramatic representation But in the abridged version which was made for stage purposes the beings of the overworld are materialised as Strophe and Antistrophe, whose functions correspond exactly to the Chorus of the older and the Two Chroniclers of the younger poet

—14th April, 1921

## FARCE

WHAT is farce? The question occurred to me suddenly the other day, and I set out at once to find the answer. First of all, because it chanced at the moment to be the nearest book of reference to me as the crow flew, I consulted Skeat's "Etymological Dictionary of the English Language." But the Rev Walter W Skeat, as befits an Elkington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge, is less interested in the dramatic sense of the word than in its family history. "A kind of comedy," says Skeat. "The original sense is 'stuffing', hence, a jest inserted into comedies." He quotes Cotgrave's French-English Dictionary to show that the word has both meanings still across the Channel—"farce, a fond and dissolute play, any stuffing in meats." Whereupon the reverend professor loses interest in its meaning, and hunts about for its collateral relatives in Latin, Greek, and Lithuanian, till finally he introduces you triumphantly to its remote ancestor, the root *bhark*. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, because it not infrequently whets a desire for more, and in consequence of my casual dip into Skeat and a certain dissatisfaction with the results thereof, I have been wasting valuable time in conducting a desultory and unsystematic search for different people's ideas on

the subject One dictionary states that "farce is distinguished from other comic compositions by the slightness of its thought and its extravagant and ridiculous self-abandon" Another gives two meanings, of which the first is ordinary enough, but the second, "an opera in one act, of an absurd, extravagant, or ludicrous character," sounds a little curious to our ears A writer in *Notes and Queries* makes the following statement "My notion of a farce is a short piece in one act, containing a single comic idea, of course considerably expanded, but without anything that can really be called a plot" On the whole, the most satisfactory definition I found was the one in the dear old *Encyclopædia Britannica* "Farce, a form of the comic in dramatic art, the object of which is to excite laughter by ridiculous situations and incidents rather than by imitation with intent to ridicule, which is the province of burlesque, or by the delineation of the play of character upon character, which is that of comedy" That represents as nearly as possible the nature of the modern farce

But this clear distinction was not always drawn between farce and burlesque Dryden, in his "Parallel of Poetry and Painting," defines farce as being "that in poetry which grotesque is in a picture, the persons and actions of a farce are all unnatural, and the manners false" Nowadays, I think we should not call a play of that description a farce at all, but a burlesque Forty years or thereabouts after Dryden, Gay wrote "The What D'Ye Call It," and called it a "Tragi-comi-pastoral Farce" To our view, this piece is not in any sense a farce, but pure burlesque—and extraordinarily funny bur-

lesque at that At this point, one of the dictionaries from which I have already quoted gives me an unexpected piece of assistance by illustrating the use of the word "farcical" by a sentence from the preface to this same "What D'Ye Call It," which runs "They deny the characters to be farcical, because they are actually in nature" So far as can be seen on the face of it, Gay disagrees with "them," and considers that characters that are natural can still be farcical That is, in theory he breaks away from Dryden, though in practice he agrees with him Unfortunately, in the public library upon which I rely, the only complete copy of Gay's works has been lost, and I have therefore been unable to turn to this Preface and find out who "they" were, and, of course, in its proper context, the sentence may mean something quite different

However the change came about, it seems pretty clear that what we call a farce now is a branch of comedy in which the characters are (allowing for a certain amount of exaggeration indispensable to any form of comic writing) ordinary individuals, thinking and speaking as ordinary people speak, but driven by force of circumstance into situations which are far from ordinary And however far-fetched these situations are, they must be as plausibly led up to as though they were the commonplaces of everyday life, otherwise they will fail to be funny Professor Saintsbury's dictum on this subject, extracted from his "History of French Literature," is, "The farce

deals with an actual or possible incident of ordinary life to which a comic complexion is given by the treatment" The less actual or possible the

situation created, the less funny will it be. Take as an example a really funny and successful farce such as "When Knights Were Bold." Clearly, the chief effect which the author of this play had in mind was the fun that could be got by taking a perfectly commonplace young man of the present day and dumping him down among a set of equally commonplace people of a day long gone by. In any ordinary sense, this situation was neither actual nor possible, and unless the author could make it seem so the farce would have been spoilt. This the author contrived by making his desired situations take place in a dream, when they at once seemed as actual and possible as could be desired.

It is the same with "Charlie's Aunt." It may be true that no undergraduate has ever impersonated another undergraduate's aunt from Brazil, but it is certainly true that there are heaps of undergraduates who would enjoy doing it if occasion arose. And once you have conceded that, the whole foolish intrigue becomes as actual and as possible as can be wished. I insist on this point chiefly because the authors of such farces as I have been condemned to witness recently seem to agree with the earlier definitions rather than the modern ones. They seem determined to make Dryden their mentor, and have the persons and actions all unnatural, and the manners false. And, so far as the Censor will let them, they seem to be also bent on following Cotgrave, and writing fond and dissolute plays. The one rule, however, which they seem to be incapable of taking in is the very one upon which all the various authorities I have quoted—even Skeat—are tacitly agreed. That is, that a farce

must be funny The last two farces which have appeared on the London stage, " Nightie Night " and " Up in Mabel's Room," do not between them contain the materials for one good, honest laugh

The reason is because both plays, as plays, are hopelessly unconvincing The authors evidently think that to see Miss Dorothy Minto roll herself up in the hearthrug or Mr Charles Hawtrey dive under a bed are experiences so mirth-provoking in themselves as to require no leading up to They do not think it matters that in order to get Miss Minto into the room where the hearthrug is, or Mr Hawtrey into the room containing the bed, they have to postulate in one case an incredible coincidence, and in the other an incredible lack of a sense of proportion But it does matter If you are going to be funny, you must work your audience up to the right pitch, otherwise your best jests will fall flat Anybody who has ever selected the wrong moment to be funny in the nursery will tell you that How much more necessary therefore to prepare your audience carefully for a jest which in its finest days was never very good ?

—21st April, 1921



## SUNSHINE

THIS IS, in general, a period of gloom and depression, of unhappiness and cynicism. The time is out of joint, and we are all inclined to dwell on the cursed spite that ever we were born to set it right, which attitude to life is duly reflected upon our stage. There is a quality for which I can think of no better word than "sunshine" in which the comedy-writers of to-day are very conspicuously lacking. Very seldom, in these days, do we get a new play which sends us home feeling that, after all, life may possibly be worth living if we only knew a little more about it.

A generation or so ago, the men who had the best interests of the stage at heart were fighting for the general recognition of the right of the stage to deal with all phases of life. Religion, politics, the seamy side of life—all these were then taboo as subjects for contemporary drama. The taboo has been practically abolished, and the modern playwright has before him nearly the whole field of human experience from which to pick out his models, but the modern playwright often seems to be a depressed and myopic individual, who can only see the one little bit of the field in which he chances to be standing. He has a tendency to be pessimistic and clever rather than optimistic and human. He allows the bad in human nature to overshadow the good to an extent which suggests that he

is rather doubtful whether the good exists at all I am speaking now of those dramatists whose work makes some claim to be considered as literature Writers like Mr Somerset Maugham and Mr H M Harwood, for instance, seem to have given the human race up as a bad job, and to have fallen back on cynicism as the only possible attitude of mind towards it

This brings me naturally to the discussion of what I mean by " sunshine " as an attribute of a comedy. It is not necessarily anything to do with sentiment, though sentiment handled by a master of the art like Barrie can produce the effect If the characters of the play are the kind of people you would like to know—if you get a feeling that you would like to climb up on the stage and join in the action of the play—that is due to " sunshine ", but even this is not a necessary factor, the people of " Dear Brutus " would have been a very uncomfortable crowd to have mixed with, but " Dear Brutus " is the most sunshiny play we have had for years The quality consists, I imagine, entirely in the attitude towards life of the author. If the writer of a comedy believes in human nature, if he is convinced that on the whole beauty is the rule in life and ugliness the exception, and if, holding that belief, he writes a play of any dramatic worth, then for the two hours or so that he holds his audience's attention, and for a little time after that (or possibly, in some cases, for a long time or for ever), he converts that audience to his own jolly philosophy They go home from his play feeling that everything is for the best in this best of possible worlds, or, if you would rather have it in the words

of a more modern bard, that everything in the garden is lovely And, whoever you may be, you must be far gone in cynicism and disillusion before a day on which you have felt that ceases to be a red-letter day

If such a day happens to come to you in the midst of what the Bellman described as "a season of woe," its red letters shine out so much the brighter by contrast with the black type all about it in your calendar You feel that it is one day, at any rate, saved from the wreck of your miserable existence I remember one such day, half-way through the war, when military duty took me by chance for one week-end to a little country town where lived some friends I had not seen since 1914 By mere chance, all the sons of the house were home on leave together, and for one glorious day I lived with them the busily idle life of the country in summer and talked the old familiar gossip of peace-time (pre-war brand) I do not remember a single thing we did that day, except that we bathed in the afternoon, but I do know that it stood out like a quiet green oasis in the drab desert of military life, and is still one of my happiest memories

Much in the same way do the days on which certain plays which I have specially liked stand out still in my mind "Peter Pan" and "What Every Woman Knows" come first, but there are others less obvious "Passers-By," by Haddon Chambers, "Nobody's Daughter," by George Paston, "A Place in the Sun," by Cyril Harcourt—to all these, as well as to Rudolf Besier's "Don," I owe a debt of gratitude Every play-goer must have a similar list Just so might some human, happy-hearted

play illumine one of these rather dreary days of 1921

The question is, who is to write it? Not the cynics—they couldn't. Not the modern disillusioned young men and women who think they portray life by looking only at its sordid side—they would be ashamed to. Probably the answer is, Barrie. That may be a sufficient answer for 1921, but Barrie cannot go on for ever. Who is to wear his mantle? The nearest approaches to a sunshiny play there have been in the last few years have been "Tilly of Bloomsbury" and one or two of Mr A. A. Milne's plays. But neither quite got there. Mr Milne has the quality of happiness, the zest for life and the sympathy that are wanted, but he has not yet shown the necessary depth. A play of the kind I am discussing must not be merely "light" comedy. Mr "Ian Hay" has also many of the necessary qualities, but at present he has not the power to make his plays ring true in the same way as his novels. In his books, he manages his love scenes and his serious moments with great skill, and they are convincing, on the stage, he devolves surprisingly into sentimentality and false rhetoric. This was just a little apparent in "Tilly of Bloomsbury", it is much more apparent in "A Safety Match". Perhaps the author would be better advised if he wrote direct for the stage. Dramatising novels is ticklish work.

That there is a huge success waiting for a play of this kind when it comes is as sure as anything can be in the uncertain world of the theatre. The success of such plays as "Paddy the Next Best Thing" and "A Safety Match," which are conceived in the right

spirit though they do not attain to a high degree of excellence, shows this All other things being equal—by which I mean such trifles as dramatic craftsmanship, skill in delineating character, deftness in fashioning dialogue—I suppose the average play-goer would rather see a pleasant play than an unpleasant If that is true, the average play-goer, looking through a theatre list to-day, is faced by a dilemma (I am never quite sure what a dilemma is, but as it has horns I take it that you can face it) All the comedies that make any serious claim to be first-rate are cynical and disillusioned, none of the comedies that are happy are worth serious consideration Probably his best solution (do you solve a dilemma? I wish I had selected a different metaphor) is to go to “ Bull-Dog Drummond ” and be thrilled

It is time somebody did something We don't want our dramatists to overdo the sunshine If our cynics suddenly ceased from troubling, and we began to find every play we visited making a strong human appeal to our hearts, we should very soon be demanding the reason why You remember the Duke in “ Patience ” and his question about toffee “ Toffee in moderation is a capital thing But to live on toffee—toffee for breakfast, toffee for dinner, toffee for tea—to have it supposed that you care for nothing but toffee, and that you would consider yourself insulted if anything but toffee were offered to you—how would you like that? ” Not at all But I imagine the same thing holds good about olives, and at the moment we are suffering from a surfeit of bitterness

—5th May, 1921

## UNITIES

THE accident that I happened to have been reading Dryden's " Essay of Dramatic Poetry " on the day on which I paid a belated visit to " A Bill of Divorcement " at the St Martin's Theatre has led me to ponder on those ancient tyrants, the Unities. Perhaps I may remind you that the essay in question forms part of a curious literary controversy between Dryden and his father-in-law, Sir Robert Howard. The controversy concluded in heat and resulted in coolness, and the thing that led up to Howard's final display of ill-temper was Dryden's introduction of him, under the name of Crites, into this essay. To the dispassionate observer Crites in the essay seems both to talk better sense and to express it better than Sir Robert Howard was capable of doing in his own person, but perhaps we could not expect Howard himself to see that. At all events, to this not always very dignified squabble we owe the best English critical treatise on the drama which had appeared up till Dryden's time.

In the argument which deals with the Unities Crites is made to take the part of the Ancients and of those contemporary French writers who had voluntarily submitted themselves to the same narrow restrictions. Later, Neander (who is Dryden him-

self) demolishes his arguments and disproves his conclusions "By their servile imitations of the Unities of Time and Place, and the integrity of scenes," says Neander of the French heroic school, "they have brought upon themselves the dearth of plot and narrowness of imagination which may be observed in all their plays How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of twenty-four hours? There is time to be allowed, also, for maturity of design, which, amongst great and prudent persons, such as are often represented in Tragedy, cannot, with any likelihood of truth, be brought to pass at so short a warning" With these words ringing in my head I read my programme at the St Martin's with more interest than those documents usually hold for me "Act I, Christmas morning," I read, "Act II, Early in the afternoon, Act III, Sundown" Unity number one Considering the time at which sundown happens on Christmas Day, the action was evidently going to conform to the rule of the very strictest French school of all—those who used to dispute "whether the artificial day of twelve hours, more or less, be not meant by Aristotle, rather than the natural one of twenty-four," as being necessary for conserving the unity of Time "Scene," my programme continued, "a room in a small country house" Unity number two Miss Clemence Dane—I said to myself—evidently belongs to the school at the head of which Dryden in this very essay placed himself—of those who, while denying the right of the Unities to exact from playwrights a slavish obedience, frankly admit that a play is all the

better for possessing them, if it can plausibly be arranged

The curtain went up, and the play began, and it was not very long before I began to think of Neander's strictures on the French classicists—"How many beautiful accidents might naturally happen in two or three days, which cannot arrive with any probability in the compass of twenty-four hours", and as I went home I found myself gently regretting that Miss Dane had allowed herself to be ruled by the unity of time. The events which she has crammed into that single day, between a late breakfast and an early tea, would probably have taken a week to happen in real life. Miss Dane, I suspect, sacrificed all other considerations to the swiftness of her main action. Two men are both laying claim to the same woman. One is the husband whom she has divorced during his madness, the other is the man she loves. The sharper and more incisive the struggle between them can be made the better. By restricting the action to one day, the author makes it easy for herself to keep up the tension of the play. You have the knowledge that before nightfall the question must be settled to which of these two men Margaret Fairfield is to belong. You feel that she is on the rack. No doubt, if the action covered a week, some of this tenseness would be lost. Possibly, even, it was worth while sacrificing some verisimilitude in order to keep it. But the sacrifices which have to be made are very serious, and in my opinion at any rate very nearly spoil the best piece of character-drawing in the play—that of Margaret's daughter Sydney.

Sydney may not be the most important character



in the play, but she is a long way the most sympathetic, and it is therefore a thousand pities that our appreciation of a really notable piece of writing for the stage should be spoilt by having the events of a week telescoped into a day. It is conceivable, in Margaret's case, that all the events of the play could happen in the time allotted. It is not possible with Sydney. This girl of seventeen has to undergo, during the few short hours covered by the action of the play, a variety of shocks such as the rest of her short life put together is hardly likely to have contained.

On Christmas morning she is engaged to Kit, and is looking forward with frank delight to the time when she will have "heaps of kids." During the day her aunt tells her that her father's madness was not merely due to shell-shock, as she had believed, that it is congenital. Later, she hears Dr Alliot say, with brutal directness, that she ought never to have been born. She determines that marriage is not for her, and that she must break with Kit. In order to make the break between them a lasting one, she determines that it shall come from Kit himself, and at once she begins a campaign of petty jealousy and cattishness designed to "choke him off." It is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that a girl of Sydney's age and Sydney's strength of feeling could summon up the superhuman self-command necessary to carry out such a heart-breaking piece of acting at a few moments' notice. Surely there must have been a period of rebellion, a time while she was fighting temptation to marry Kit and chance the consequences, or simply an interval of sheer ungovernable misery,

before she could have faced her piece of heroic deception

But even if you feel that in this the play is psychologically correct—that Sydney, being what she was, could have risen even to these heights of self-abnegation—there is another point where this telescoping process is very plainly a defect in construction. At least, in real life, Sydney would not, as a preparatory to the “choking-off” process, have explained to Kit exactly what she was going to do to him. That is what the author has had to make her do. “You can’t stop a person being fond of you,” says Kit. “When it’s a man you can,” retorts Sydney, and goes on almost without a break, “My dear boy, if a girl finds that it’s not right for her to marry a man, it’s up to her to choke him off.” And when Kit stoutly maintains that it couldn’t be done, she says, “As if I couldn’t choke you off in five minutes if I wanted to!” So far, so good, but Sydney was surely much too clear-sighted and far too much in earnest to choose the next five minutes after a conversation like that in order to give, so to speak, an exhibition of the gentle art of “choking-off.” It would have been asking for defeat. Kit may not have been a particularly bright youth, but surely she had not such an utter contempt for his intellect as that would imply. If this scene had been divided in the middle, and the two halves introduced in different acts, with an interval of a day or two between them, they would carry complete conviction without the alteration of a syllable, but as it now stands I must confess I find the scene incredible.

If this first play of Miss Dane’s were not a very

remarkable performance I should have no reason for laying such stress on what seems to me its weak point. The production of "A Bill of Divorcement" is something of a dramatic event, because it introduces yet one more new name into the list (never very long) of dramatists to whose next work we can look forward with interest and hope. The chief point of excellence of Miss Dane's work is its actability. Everybody in the cast finds themselves given something to say that is worth saying well, and I thought that at least four of the cast had never had parts to suit them better. An author whose characters can produce that impression has a real *flair* for the stage.

—12th May, 1921

## LIGHT COMEDY

IN the old days—the very old days, that is—when you had written a play, you were in no difficulty in what class to place it. If you were by profession a tragedian, you wrote tragedy, if on the other hand your desires were less exalted, you wrote comedy, by which you meant burlesque. And under no circumstances, if you were Euripides, did you Aristophanise, nor, being Aristophanes, did you attempt to excite pity and terror in your audiences.

Nowadays things are not quite so nicely defined. Pure tragedy is no longer written, its place has been taken by what used to be called *tragi-comedy*—that is, plays in which tragic and comic elements are as indissolubly blended as they are in life, and which can only be definitely labelled tragedy or comedy by judging them according as they end unhappily or happily. If nowadays you write a play designed to amuse, you can call it almost anything, so long as you keep in your mind the fact that comic plays still divide themselves into three well-defined classes—comedy, burlesque, and farce. (I say “still” advisedly, because I distrust the possible influence on dramatic terminology of the film trade, what would be called “high comedy” on the stage is known as “comedy-drama” in technical film language, “comedy” on the screen is already a degraded word and simply

means farce, while anything wild enough to be called "farce" on the films would probably be something too awful to be produced at all on the stage )

These three methods of being amusing are widely different, and if you attempt to mix them you court disaster. A given situation might conceivably be dealt with in any of the three ways, but it should not be dealt with by more than one at the same time. The methods of comedy and burlesque are so obviously different—being respectively portraiture and caricature—that playwrights seldom fail to differentiate between the two, but the methods of comedy, which in this particular connection means "light comedy," and farce are outwardly so very much alike that they are only too often confused. "Light comedy" employs exactly the same methods as high comedy, only the story with which it chooses to deal is slight, and its effect on the characters goes less deep. But, like its more serious relative, it deals with human character as it is, and uses incident as the machinery for exhibiting that character. Farce, on the other hand, uses character merely as the machinery for exhibiting incident.

The two methods are speciously alike to the eye, but as far apart as the poles when you come to analyse them, one proof of this is found in the fact that they each need quite different kinds of acting and even of actors. In light comedy, for instance, it is perfectly permissible to have serious scenes, which is quite obviously wrong in a farce. Think, for instance, of Mr Reginald Berkeley's "French Leave," which had such a deserved success last year. Here was a theme in which the author had the choice before him

whether he would write a light comedy or a farce It would no doubt have made an excellent farce But Mr Berkeley chose the way which was better worth while, and kept to the comedy method Once you had granted him his original situation (which, after all, might quite easily have happened), wherein a wife manages to wangle her way in disguise to her husband's rest-billet, he made no further claim on your credulity whatever All the people of the play were real, and talked and thought like real people Given the circumstances and the persons, things would probably have happened just like that in real life The husband's troubles were the actual troubles of existence, not the mechanical ones of farce And Mr Berkeley, with a very sure touch, kept his play in this key from beginning to end, getting his effects from character rather than incident, and not letting himself be tempted to capture cheap laughs

I believe that the importance of keeping to one key is pretty generally understood by our own playwrights, but in America it seems to be understood hardly at all In these days, when so many of our lighter stage entertainments of every kind are imported from America, this has its importance. It accounts for the failure in England of quite a number of plays which have succeeded in the land of their birth Quite a common, and very glaring, fault of these importations is that they strive to combine farcical treatment of one part of the play with comedy treatment of another As an example, let me resurrect for one moment from its grave one of the failures of last year "Will You Kiss Me?" This play might possibly have made a reasonably good light comedy,

it could certainly have been made into a funny farce. As it was, it was a hybrid. The central figure was a super-efficient young product of intensive education who was put in charge of a millionaire's slap-dash household in order to curb its propensity to extravagance and idleness. He was an excellent farcical character, and behaved as such. The spectacle of the millionaire's indignant offspring being dragooned into efficiency was quite funny.

All went well. The characters displayed that specious resemblance to humanity which farce demands, but you had a comfortable knowledge all the time that they were just puppets, dancing this way or that according to the exigencies of the plot. And then the exigencies of the plot demanded that the efficiency expert should fall in love with the millionaire's daughter—puppet with puppet. He did so, and promptly became an earnest young man very much in love. The whole tone and tempo of the play changed. You felt as if you had suddenly been transported to another theatre, where a sentimental comedy was going on, a most upsetting feeling. Anyhow, it seemed to upset such audiences as came to it. Not long afterwards I saw a report in the Press that the management had made drastic alterations, converting the play into a farce pure and simple, but it was too late. The play died.

Of course, it does not always die. Sometimes such a play has qualities which keep it alive in spite of a mixture of methods. As an example of this let me quote "The Charm School". This play was cut out for a farce, if any play ever was. The central idea, of a beautiful young man coming into possession of a

girls' school, was farcical, and even more farcical was much of the working out—the appointment of the young man's obviously unsuitable friends to various "professorships," for instance. And yet on to this situation was grafted two serious and (in themselves) rather charming love affairs, and an outburst of sheer sloppy sentiment by the headmistress of the school. This last, I am told, was very soon taken out, which must have been a great relief to Miss Halliday, the actress who had been condemned to speak it. All these things were incongruous, but some quality in the writing, and still more quality in the acting, made the whole play enjoyable, and so it had a very fair success.

To read the criticisms of "The Charm School" in the Press was both amusing and instructive. The almost unanimous verdict was, "I rather enjoyed myself, but against my better judgment." Probably many more people than the critics felt like this, consciously or otherwise. It is a critic's business not only to know whether he likes or dislikes a play, but also to explain just why he likes or dislikes it. The plain man in the audience has the same feelings as the critic, but has not as a rule trained himself to analyse them. Violent changes of method in different parts of the same play jar on English audiences, whether they realise the cause or not. On American audiences, it seems, such changes do not jar. Not long ago I was fortunate enough to meet a clever American lady journalist who was in this country studying (among other things) the English theatre. I tackled her on this particular point, and cited the two plays I have mentioned above. "Why do your authors do



this? ” I asked her—expecting to hear a spirited defence of the practice Her answer was gratifying to insular pride—even if its unlooked-for meekness made me feel rather as if I had organised a complicated gas-attack against unoccupied trenches “ I think,” she said, “ it is because they don’t know any better It never occurred to me that it was wrong before I came to London, but of course I see it now ”

—19th May, 1921

## HODGE-PODGE

I HAVE to thank Mr Paul F Sifton, in his spirited reply to my article on " Light Comedy " for teaching me the word which stands at the head of this page. I confess that I was not surprised to read Mr Sifton's letter. The article in question was not primarily designed as a criticism of American methods of writing comedy, its chief purpose was to bring home to the people who choose our plays for us here in London that productions in which the methods of farce and comedy are mixed up do not suit the English public. As the American public show no such dislike, I took my examples from American successes which have failed on this side, and, in consequence, a good deal of direct or implied criticism of American methods crept in. I even ventured to show that this critical attitude is not altogether unshared by Americans who have studied the subject. Such an attitude was bound to be challenged by some champion of the American method.

I welcome Mr Sifton's apology for the " hodge-podge " of American comedy for two reasons partly because it gives me an opportunity to elaborate my reasons for writing as I did of American methods, but also because his letter very thoroughly endorses my main statement, that you should be very careful how you choose American plays for the English stage.

Mr Sifton's argument is that "hodge-podge" plays hit the public taste in America because the American people is itself a "hodge-podge" "American comedy is American comedy," he says, "and English comedy is English comedy Each should have its own standard by which it may be criticised" But before going into questions of artistic value, let me put the situation clearly on its most sordid basis Whether such plays are good or bad, a manager in America certainly is commercially justified in putting on a "hodge-podge" play, because he has a public which likes it In England no manager ought to put on such a play (unless, of course, it has some great counter-attraction to offer), because the public doesn't like it I do not at all limit this statement to imported American plays As it happens, one of the last new productions I have seen at the moment of writing is a British play which has been already withdrawn after a few days' run In my opinion it has failed for no other reason than this mixing of methods by its author, and the fact that whoever chose it did not recognise this fundamental weakness in it "The Tartan Peril" might have been an excellent extravaganza As it was, it was everything by turns and nothing long I hope the managers will take its ignominious failure as some proof of the truth of the axiom to which I pinned my faith in my previous article

But now let me return to the consideration of Mr Sifton's apologia from a rather higher critical standpoint He does not defend such plays only on the ground of commercial success, but also on the ground of artistic appropriateness to the country of

their origin America "is still the Land Where Anything May Happen in actual life How much more so in the theatre? It is right by all the laws of cause and effect, equilibrium, and beauty that American playwrights should hodge-podge their creations " This, you will admit, is ingenious, and at first sight it seems plausible But it is founded on a misapprehension, for all that America is a "hodge-podge", England is a terribly settled country—in a sense, at any rate Therefore, American plays will be a hodge-podge, English will not So far, so good—perfectly true But wherein does this "hodge-podge" consist? Since "America is the Land Where Anything May Happen," there will be in its plays a hodge-podge of incident Since "America is the greatest, most baffling hodge-podge of peoples, ideals, traditions and circumstances on earth," there will be in its plays a hodge-podge of characters Granted "A sweets-seller may grow up to be the favourite playwright and song-writer, the darling of the largest city of the New World " A play on that theme would not worry us, even if it introduced specimens of every one of the medley of races that go to make up New York's population A cleverly written and constructed drama which was a "hodge-podge" only in its incidents and its *dramatis personæ* might easily hit the public taste here But what Mr Sifton allows himself to defend is a hodge-podge of methods, and that is wrong not only from a British point of view, but with reference to every established artistic standard

However varied or however violently contrasted the characters or incidents of a play may be, the play

itself—if it is to have any claim whatever to artistic value—must be an organic whole. It must be the work of its creator, embodying his view of life. It is not possible to uphold the idea that life itself gives the dramatist his play ready-made. Life supplies the raw material, but it depends entirely on the dramatist's point of view and his technical method what kind of a play comes of that material. The material of which one writer fashions a farce appears to another as the theme of a stirring drama. Both may be successful, because both may be organic structures which express the two writers' quite opposite ideas. But if one writer tries to combine in one play these two points of view, the play becomes instantly and inevitably a patchwork.

The American lady whom I quoted in my former article stated frankly her view that American audiences go to these patchwork plays because they "don't know any better", by which she meant that they are lacking not in intelligence, but in experience. Mr Sifton, having categorically denied that they don't know any better, goes on to show by implication that his opinion is exactly the same as that of his countrywoman. (I am careful here to state no opinion of my own on either side, because I have not had an opportunity of studying American audiences, and my opinion is necessarily valueless.) Mr Sifton says that American and English comedy should "each have its own standard by which it may be criticised". But he goes on to admit that in America they have no such standard. "We have been busy trying to write the comedies," he says, "and have neglected criticism. Because we have evolved no standard, we suffer when

the canons of another school are used in judgment upon us But give us time, and we will attend to that " If, then, the Americans have neglected criticism, and if their public have not the standard which Mr Sifton thinks so necessary, how can that public be expected to know good from bad? The original statement to which Mr Sifton took exception was " They don't know any better " But he seems to me to have supplied an excellent reason why they *can't* know any better

All Americans to whom I have spoken on this subject agree on one point—that they have hitherto neglected criticism, and so I must believe it is true But I am sure that it will not remain true very long Nobody who read Mr William Archer's recent article on this page, in which he paid generous tribute to the work of one of the New York critics, can doubt that The missing standard will most certainly be evolved soon When it comes I believe Mr Sifton will find that it will condemn plays which are " hodge-podge " in their outlook and their technical methods I wonder whether Mr Sifton will think that this reiterated opinion is due merely to my British obstinacy I hope not

—2nd June, 1921

## A BOOK OF PLAYS

As soon as I heard that Messrs Chatto and Windus had published Mr A A Milne's "Second Plays" I made haste to get a copy with a view to discussing it on this page. And having begun the book in the ordinary way at the beginning—that is to say, with the introduction—I found myself swelling with conscious virtue. For Mr Milne's introduction begins with what he calls an "attack" on dramatic critics, his complaint being that they hardly ever do what I am doing here—that is, criticise published plays. (That is why I want to make it quite clear that I thought of dealing with Mr Milne's book before I knew that he had told me I ought to.)

However, as I continued the introduction, I found myself quickly deflating again. What Mr Milne is particularly anxious that I and my kind should do is to criticise the plays that have been published, but not produced, to let the managers know how wrong, or how right, they were not to produce them. That is just what I am not doing, but it is Mr Milne's fault, because all the plays in his new book have been produced, and I myself have seen them all acted—except, I believe, "The Camberley Triangle". However, one of these five plays hardly counts as having been produced, because it has appeared only

at charity matinées with an all-star cast This is a one-act piece called "The Stepmother" In it an illegitimate and uneducated son, having discovered, after the death of his mother, that his father is a prominent and blameless M P, arrives at the M P's house to blackmail him, and is persuaded not to, for the sake of his own honour, by the M P's wife Mr Milne himself says that "nothing much need be said" of this little play Let it be put down, then, to the foolish perversity of my nature that I propose to devote to it most of my space

But first I ought to explain my own attitude to Mr Milne's work His particular brand of irresponsible humour has a very strong appeal for me, and has had ever since I first met it in *Punch* I have read, I suppose, nearly everything he has written When I was at Cambridge, I hunted up his early work in the files of *The Granta* Except for an early work, long out of print, he has published nothing in book form that I do not know well Even in the case where his matter gives me no pleasure, his manner is a constant delight There was, I am sure, nobody better pleased than myself when he began to show that he could transfer to the stage the same charm that had already given him an enthusiastic reading public His stage dialogue proved as clear, as unforcedly funny, and as consistently individual as his *Punch* work had been, and the fact that his plots proved rather thin and his construction not exactly strong did not prevent each new play of his from being a treat to me All this is a roundabout way of saying that Mr Milne's chief appeal is as an individualist, a—I hate the word—"stylist" It is not what he says that gets me and



his public generally quite so much as the way he says it. He knows this perfectly well himself. In his introduction he says "I really know nothing about play-writing, and I am only sustained by two beliefs. The first is that rules are always made for the other people, the second is that, if a play by me is not obviously by me, and as obviously not by anybody else, then (obviously) I had no business to write it." Which brings me by a natural transition to "The Stepmother."

I saw this little play beautifully acted at one of the charity matinees, and its impression on me was that it was not obviously by Mr Milne, and (except for a familiar mannerism here and there) not obviously not by anybody else—the sentence is clumsy, but I hope clear, and the inference from the quotation above I leave you to draw. In fact, the play struck me as a reasonably good little effort which anybody might have written. When I read it in the new book, however, this impression was not so clear. The reason is that Mr Milne has put into his stage-directions and his descriptions of the characters all the individuality of style which has escaped him in the working out of the play. In his introduction he says that "The Stepmother" was refused by the Coliseum management because it was "too serious" for that place of amusement. Well, I wonder. Tradition demands that I should never impute intelligence to theatrical managers, but I cannot help feeling that an equally serious play a little more obviously by Mr Milne would not have been refused. In fact, I feel that in this little play Mr Milne has stepped outside his own province, wherein he is an acknowledged ruler, to

find that the inhabitants of the next province do not recognise his authority at all I do not mean that Mr Milne ought not to be serious, but he ought to be serious in his own individual way He has shown that he can be so in the unproduced piece published in his "First Plays" under the title of "The Lucky One" That is pure Milne all through, and it never makes you feel as I did in "The Stepmother," that the author has gone out of his depth

Depth—there you have it Mr Milne has to suffer from the defects of his virtues, and to learn to keep within his own limitations It seems to me that the chief limitation of his method is that it does not easily allow of much depth of characterisation For Mr Milne's sense of character I have the profoundest respect It was one of the chief glories of his *Punch* work Do you remember his country house cricket series in the years just before the war, how clearly Archie and Myra, Thomas and Simpson, and the writer himself were characterised? Not by any description—that was the beauty of it—but by the things they said They were all lovable, all alive, all happy, and all different But they were not deep (there was no reason why they should be), and they were Milne That is not to say that Mr Milne has no depth himself It is simply that the problem before him is how to indicate depth by means of a style primarily adapted to dealing with frivolity Take the light-hearted irresponsibility out of his dialogue and it is no longer his, and yet—Mr Milne is obviously at heart (like all humorists) a serious person, with things to say The only solution of this difficulty is that Mr Milne will have to continue along

his own lines, and elaborate the method of "Mr Pim Passes By" and "The Romantic Age" In each of these plays there is a serious underlying motive which gets itself perfectly clearly expressed through the medium of characteristic Milne dialogue In "The Lucky One" you have the same medium used for rather a more direct expression of the serious motive In "The Stepmother" the expression is too direct, and the medium fails

The fact that these last two plays have both sought in vain for a manager to undertake their production ought not to be given undue importance, but neither should it be ignored It goes to show that Mr Milne has encouraged us all to look upon him as a manufacturer of a peculiarly fine quality of jam He himself likes making jam, but feels that jam in too large quantities is unwholesome, and, besides, he has a secret feeling that he was really intended for a maker of pills We, as consumers of whatever he decides to compound, have very clear ideas on the subject We will take all the jam he cares to make, we don't in the least mind having a pill included, so long as it is well covered—in fact, it gives the jam a certain body and substance without altering the taste But if Mr Milne ever set up as a pill-maker only he would find himself competing in the open market with the regular pill-makers, and we should not feel that his pills were likely to be better than anybody else's, whereas his jam is a proprietary article, and the best of its own particular kind

—23rd June, 1921

## PUBLISHED PLAYS

A MAN who sets out to be a writer of plays—I am here talking of the man with a serious call as a dramatist, not the deluded neophyte who comes home from seeing “Quality Street” fired with the resolve to write something just as good next day—is faced with one great difficulty, that is, the difficulty of learning his job. Play-writing, like any other kind of writing, cannot be learnt without experience, but, like every other kind of writing, it can be learnt far more easily with experience and criticism combined than with experience alone. A young aspirant writes a play, he sends it out with high hopes to an actor-manager. In due course it returns—it returns again and again. He knows something is wrong, but he does not know what. He writes another play, with the knowledge that whatever fault it was that spoilt his first effort may very likely be present in his second, and so on.

What he wants is criticism—not from friends and relations, not from inexpert strangers, but from qualified judges, who know nothing of him, and care only for his work. Without that he cannot make proper use of his experience. But criticism is just what he cannot get. The readers, the managers, the actors to whom he sends his manuscripts, are busy people,

whose object in reading a play is to find out whether the play is fit for production or not, and not to give the playwright hints. They send back the rejected play with a remark whose politeness is all the less comforting because it is printed on a slip. Here the story-writer has a great advantage over his brother the playwright. He writes for a much bigger market. He can learn his job by contributing all kinds and sizes of story to all kinds of papers, have them commented on by all kinds of editors, learn how much can be cut out of a story without injuring it, in fact, get his experience and criticism together. Consequently, the playwright is not only much longer over learning his business, but it is a more precarious business when learnt. And yet good plays are far more anxiously needed, and cause far more joy when they arrive, than any novel. It seems clear that something ought to be done to make the way of our young aspirants easier.

To do that, it is equally clear that somebody must be ready to take a great deal of trouble. The managers, or their readers, cannot do it. They are busy men. The dramatic critics cannot do it, they have their hands full also. Besides, it is certain that any dramatic critic who signified that he was prepared to read and criticise manuscript plays would be snowed under by return of post. Somebody must undertake the spadework of sorting the wheat from the chaff before managers and critics can do their part. In this way very fine work is already done by the various play-producing societies, such as the Play Actors, the number of which is steadily increasing, but even they cannot cover more than a certain amount of ground.

The number of plays they can produce is very limited—what of the plays which, with all the will in the world, they cannot find room for? Mr A A Milne, in a preface from which I have already had occasion to quote, suggests that the remedy is ready to the aspirant's hand “When the promising young dramatist has had his play refused by the managers—after what weeks, months, years of hope and fear, uncertainty, and bitter disappointment—he has this great consolation ‘Anyway, I can always publish it’” But can he? Mr Milne can publish his unproduced plays, because he is a writer of established reputation But can the “promising young dramatist” who is at present unknown do the same? I doubt it Most of the published plays that I come across are either by established authors or have been produced—generally with success—on the stage I can think of one or two notable exceptions to this rule, it is true, but it will usually be found that the exceptions are plays written without much real idea of production, by poets who already have their own faithful public, and, anyhow, one or two exceptions are not enough to justify Mr Milne's promising young dramatist in his belief that he can “always” publish He ought to be able to publish, certainly, but it is fairly easy to see why he can't If you go to your branch (anyhow, if I go to my branch) of a circulating library, you (or at all events I) learn that they do not keep plays If you want plays you must buy them Nobody reads plays So that if plays by famous or notorious dramatists are not read in large enough quantities to make it worth the libraries' while to stock them, what chance have the publishers of mak-

ing a paying business of the publication of plays by unknown dramatists?

This last is a rhetorical question, expecting the answer "None." But there is now a scheme afoot in one quarter for altering that answer and for giving the young aspirant his chance. This quarter is the Shakespeare Head Press at Stratford-on-Avon, now in full swing again after the stoppage which was caused by the death of its founder, the late Mr A. H. Bullen. Their scheme, I understand, is to undertake play-publication on an ambitious scale in co-operation with the British Drama League. I give the exact words of my informant, the secretary of the Shakespeare Head Press: "The scheme is to propagate by publication a corpus of modern drama approved by the league, publication will be made commercially possible (and at a cheap price) by the plays being backed to the requisite minimum number of the edition by the league's members, before publication, in return, of course, for their being able to buy at a preferential rate. In order to secure publishing support for the deserving unknown equally with the famous, the league wants the plays to be subscribed for in batches of four." Now here, it seems to me, is a new opportunity for the young aspirant—and an extremely hectic time coming at the sign of the Shakespeare Head. As soon as this scheme is in working order (and that, I am told, will be at no very distant time) the unacted dramatist will be able, if his play is worth anything, to get it printed. He will be able to put it in a handy form before the public, the managers, and the critics, and its merit should then be in a very fair way to be recognised. At any rate,

he stands a far better chance of learning his job. He gets his publisher's view of his work, to begin with, and then he will get the criticisms. And those criticisms ought to be written not by reviewers, but by dramatic critics. Mr Milne, in that same oft-quoted preface of his, says that dramatic critics do not criticise unproduced plays, even when they are published. In answer to that I can only say that in my own experience they are not often given the chance.

In the last eighteen months or so the number of published plays that have reached me for criticism has been extraordinarily small, the number worth dealing with has been infinitesimal. During the past few weeks, for some unknown reason, there has been a change, a steady stream of plays has been flowing in. But even among this number there are very few which are the work of aspiring young dramatists. Mr Galsworthy's latest volume, the comedies of the late Harold Chapin, an allegorical work to which lyrics have been supplied by the late Ella Wheeler Wilcox—these are the plays which attain publication at present.

—29th September, 1921



## A MIXED BAG

JUST at present there seems to be an unusual number of books concerned with the theatre coming from the publishers. The pile on my desk has been growing steadily for the last few weeks, and now the time has come when I must either deal with the pile or be snowed under. As a matter of strict fact, there are two piles, one is of plays, the other of books on the theatre. The plays—there are nineteen in number—seem to have the right of priority.

First on the list in size, and quite possibly in importance, comes "The Comedies of Harold Chapin." There is an introduction to this book, written by Sir James Barrie, and I am strongly tempted to fill the rest of my article with extracts from his most delightful essay. But no—the thought of those other fifteen plays, not by Chapin, deters me. Besides, four of the fifteen are by Barrie himself. I must leave you to read this introduction for yourselves, and deal with the comedies as best I may. I rejoice to find Barrie speaking with the warmest appreciation of "The New Morality." This play is put first in the book, and rightly so. It reads as delightfully as it can be acted. When it was produced by the Play Actors, Miss Athene Seyler gave the performance of a lifetime as Betty Jones. Later, when it was given a chance for a series of matinées,

Miss Seyler was not in the cast, and the result was a disappointment. The play is a very subtle piece of work, it calls for extremely careful casting as well as clever acting. But in the Play Actors' performance Miss Seyler and Mr J. H. Roberts were nothing short of marvellous in the way they had worked themselves into the skin of their parts. I still live in hopes that the London public will be given a chance of enjoying such a real acting treat. Of the other three comedies in the book, "Art and Opportunity" is a delightfully-done study of a minx, and "Elaine"—the least considerable of the four plays—is a satire on conventional ideas of marriage. "The Marriage of Columbine" does not come in the same category. It has not the same qualities of sureness, of finish, and of polish as the others. It is an experiment, and an experiment which does not quite come off. But it is obvious that Barrie, though rating it below either of the two first plays, considers it potentially the best of them all. It is on the possibilities revealed in this play that Barrie bases his final remark, that, so far as his particular art is concerned, Chapin was probably the greatest "might have been" that fell in the war.

The book of Barrie's own plays that I have received is a reprint of four one-act war plays, first of which stands "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals." As it happens, this is the only one of the four that I have seen acted, and it is (like "The New Morality") memorable to me not only for itself but for a specially fine piece of acting. It was in the part of the Scotch charwoman, Mrs Dowie, that Miss Jean Cadell first came into prominence. The other three plays—"The New Word," "Barbara's Wedding,"

and "A Well-Remembered Voice"—I have never seen on the stage, and as I close the book I realise how much I must have missed. Barrie's work always has that supreme ease and sureness which makes his readers feel that they, too, could write something just as good, if they really cared to try. In his Chapin preface (I knew I should begin quoting from that preface before very long) he explains that when he agreed to write an introduction to the volume he cautiously "bought a book about how to write plays (there are many of them), in order to see whether Mr Chapin wrote his properly." In one sense Barrie certainly does not write his plays properly. Imagine one of those excellent right-is-right-and-wrong-is-wrong people opening "The Old Lady" under the impression that he is to read a play, he finds that instead of the businesslike beginning he is accustomed to, with a description of the scene and the characters in bald words, he has to read seven pages of whimsical Barrie prose, all in the authentic narrative manner, before the play can be said to begin. It is true that by the end of those seven pages he knows rather more about the characters, and can visualise the scene with more distinctness than is usual, but that is beside the point. It is not the proper way to begin a play. And as he goes on the reader gets still more worried. The thing wanders in and out of the dramatic form in the most exasperating way. Here and there it behaves itself for pages together. But just as our conventional-minded reader has settled himself down to it, off it goes again pretending it's a short story. It is just the same in the other plays. Take the opening page of "The New Word"—that excellent

realisation of the relations, surface and essential, of mother, father, son, and daughter "Any room nowadays must be the scene, for any father and any son are the *dramatis personæ* It is a great gathering to choose from, but our needs are small Let the company shake hands and all go away but two " And with the two that remain Barrie makes his play, or story, or whatever it is The climax of "A Well-Remembered Voice" somehow is to me the most striking thing in the book A boy has been killed in the war His mother is trying hard to get into communication with him by means of séances and the like, she obtains results—for instance, meaningless messages such as "Love Bade Me Welcome", but her husband, who cannot believe that such messages have real significance, mourns for his son in silence One night the boy appears to his father—he is allowed to appear to one person only, and has chosen his father because his sorrow is the greater—and in conversation it is proved that none of the so-called messages which the mother has received were sent by the boy The mother's efforts are, then, proved to be so much self-deception And then—it appears that the password, by use of which the boy has penetrated to his old earthly home, is that same meaningless sentence "Love Bade Me Welcome" This little touch exalts the whole play

I have left myself little enough space, in all conscience, in which to deal with Mr Galsworthy's "Six Short Plays" Of these, "The First and the Last" is a dramatisation of a short story, and was more successful—it seems to me—in its original form "The Little Man" gives the author a chance

of some delightful satire, not perhaps as subtle as we are accustomed to expect from him, at the expense of various nationalities. Of the others, the one which appeals to me most powerfully is "Punch and Go"—a biting little piece of criticism in play form. An extract from the remarks of the chief character, Mr Frust—a theatre "boss"—gives the text of the whole. "I've only one rule, sir," he says. "Give the Public what it wants, and what the Public wants is punch and go. They've got no use for Beauty, Allegory, all that high-brow racket." And so he scraps an imaginative play, deprives a young actress of her "chance," and offers her as a consolation "the part of the tweeny in 'Pop Goes the Weasel'." From Chapin, Barrie, and Galsworthy, to Miss Ruth Helen Davis's two plays "with lyrics by Ella Wheeler Wilcox," is something of a drop. "The Supreme Victory" is as unsophisticated a little allegory as you could wish to meet with, as can be seen by a glance at the cast of characters. The hero is a peasant by the name of Disinteresso, he marries, after many trials, the Princess Innocenza. The trials in question are chiefly provided by the two villains, Amor Proprio and Mentitore. It is perhaps not necessary to make any other remark upon the play except that it is exactly what you would expect, given the cast. The second play, "Yesterday and To-day," has higher aims dramatically, but it fails to rise above mediocrity because none of the characters are realised as individuals. They are simply types. The last play is "An English version by Christopher St John of 'Op Hoop Van Zegen,' by Herman Heijermans," under the title of "The

Good Hope " This fine drama has been done many times by Miss Ellen Terry in the provinces, in the suburbs, and in America, but only once, and for one performance, in London. The central idea of an unseaworthy ship sent to sea by greedy and unscrupulous owners is shared with, if not taken from, Ibsen. But the play is worth reading for itself, and the translation is of a high order.

—20th October, 1921

## TECHNIQUE AND THE AMATEUR

THERE is one mark of the amateur writer which never loses its power to surprise me whenever I come across it—his lofty scorn for technique. To judge by the things I have heard said by amateur writers, you would imagine that they regard technique as a kind of Mark of the Beast, branding the possessor as a commercial person who prostitutes his art—if he ever had any—for sordid ends. Whenever an amateur playwright completes a play his one very natural idea is to persuade some friend who is a professional playwright, critic, or novelist to read it and express “a candid opinion.” The friend, if he is wise, refuses point-blank to do anything of the kind. If he is weak he undertakes the job—repenting bitterly later on.

What happens is this. The professional reads through the manuscript and finds (for I am not talking about miracles) that it is utterly unsuited in every way for the stage. On the other hand, he very often finds that the main plot is good, that the characters are well-conceived—in fact, that there is the material of quite a good play there. The only difficulty is that the author is quite incapable of handling that material, and that nothing short of about five years’ hard work spent in getting technique will enable him to handle it. The professional expresses this opinion as brutally as he dares. “Oh,” says the author

“ But that’s not what I meant at all I wanted you to criticise the *idea* of the play After all, that’s the chief thing, isn’t it? ” Well—it is and it isn’t To take a simple example from another art, it is all very well to have the ideas of a Fritz Kreisler But unless you also possess the supple fingers and the delicately-poised muscular control that Kreisler has laboured to achieve, you cannot express those ideas. That is what the amateur can’t, or won’t, see I will take a concrete example

Some time back I consented, in one of those weak moments I have already mentioned, to read and criticise a play by a beginner The author had been inspired by “ Abraham Lincoln ” to write a play round another great historical figure He asked for a comparison of his play with Mr Drinkwater’s Now, the subject was a good one It has inspired playwrights before, and will again It was obvious, also, that the author had considerable knowledge of and interest in his chief character But he had no notion whatever how to express that knowledge and interest He began his play with three speeches averaging two hundred and fifty words in length, and so crowded with historical detail that the brain reeled at the prospect of an audience trying to take them in. Everybody talked alike in the language of a Civil Service minute, rising at emotional moments to an imitation of Mr Lloyd George’s more figurative style I sat down and wrote a detailed technical comparison of the author’s opening with that of “ Abraham Lincoln,” pointing out how his three long opening speeches covered the same ground as thirty-six speeches of lively conversation in Mr Drinkwater’s



play, and how the result of the latter method was to get the audience not only interested but also at far closer grips with the situation

It was no good. He wrote back more in sorrow than in anger, and I will quote from his exact words: "When I asked for a comparison with Drinkwater's play I rather meant as regards the relative degree of interest mine might be expected to arouse in the mind of a modern audience. I did not so much want a comparison as regards technique." (He did not see, you observe, that stage technique has for its chief object the holding of an audience's interest.) He continued,

"I think the essence of a good play is that it should be interesting, and I really do not see why dialogue in which the average speech is (say) one hundred and fifty words long may not be as interesting as that in which it is fifteen words long."

After a wild but unsuccessful effort to imagine a cast of actors capable of interesting an audience in a play of this remarkable description, I wrote once more, stating with quite brutal frankness that his play was dull to read, and would be still duller to act, and therefore hardly made a very good foundation on which to base his theory, and I told him that in my view he could not possibly make a playwright until he had learnt to respect technique. I expect he still regards me as a lost soul straying after false gods.

This writer was the complete amateur, he had none of the essential qualities of a playwright except the indispensable one of wishing to write a play. But I have known one instance at least of a really promising beginner, who knew that playwriting is a craft which needs long apprenticeship, and yet unconsciously

betrayed some traces of this curious idea that technique is something beneath the notice of an artist. She—it was a lady this time—had an artless habit of telling an incident for the stage as for a novel. She *would* keep secrets from the audience. When I pointed out that she was thus throwing away her best chances of keeping her audience interested, she said despairingly, “I do not believe I shall ever be able to learn the tricks. I shall only be able to write naturally.”

That sums up the amateur attitude in a phrase. They will not see that the more technique they possess the more natural their writing becomes. They will not believe that the possession of technique merely ensures you the ability to put your idea before your public in the most attractive and striking way. It is possible, of course, to make too much of it, but in proportion as you despise it, or rely too little on it, you write yourself down amateur and no true craftsman. One dramatist of some note who seems to me to cripple his work by insufficient attention to technique is Lord Dunsany. “If” is a success, in spite of faulty construction and wantonly thrown-away chances of richly comic developments. I believe that the play, written with just a little more skill, would now have been a stupendous success with another year’s run before it, as it is, it has come to an end after only a very fair run. That I should have picked Lord Dunsany out in this way as a cautionary example has its piquancy, for before me lies the book which inspired this article, it is a text-book on Dramatic Technique, and on page forty-nine the author takes a passage from one of Lord Dunsany’s shorter plays as an illustration with regard

to one particular technical point, of "how to do it!" These two seemingly opposite statements are easily reconcilable. Lord Dunsany has a natural gift for writing plays, a great deal of the technique which others must acquire he possesses by instinct. But he has not taken the trouble to develop his natural gift, and so he has come to be quoted as a model by an author whom he would do well to study as a disciple.

The author in question is Mr George Pierce Baker, Professor of Dramatic Literature in Harvard University, and every amateur dramatist who thinks he can write a play by the light of nature alone should be forced to read this book through carefully three times before being permitted again to put pen to paper. This book is, from first to last, essentially practical. "It endeavours," says its author, "by showing the inexperienced dramatist how experienced dramatists have solved problems similar to his own, to shorten a little his time of apprenticeship," and he goes on to explain that it is "the result of almost daily discussion for some years with classes of the ideas contained in it." Professor Baker recognises fully the limitations which any such work must necessarily have, he is not hoping to make dramatists out of those who have not in them the creative spark. But any beginner coming to this book with the object of learning his craft will certainly save himself endless lessons in the hard school of experience. Every rule that the author evolves is illustrated by extracts taken from plays that have achieved success. In many places, he has actually printed side by side successful and unsuccessful efforts to get the same effect, illustrating by what small, deft touches a practised dramatist

makes his points And he has everywhere winged words for the amateur, never letting him forget—to quote a last sentence taken at random—“ how difficult and painstaking is this art of the drama which I have thought so easy and spontaneous ”

—3rd November, 1921

## THE LITTLE MORE

NOT long ago I made passing reference, in an article on technique, to the structure of Lord Dunsany's play "If" By one of those small coincidences which happen so often, but never fail to surprise, that article was still lying on my table, its ink hardly dry, when the post brought me a review copy of the play in question, and so I have been taking the opportunity of going over the text and comparing its effect with the impressions made on me by the play when I saw it acted As you may remember, the general verdict of the critics after the first night (at which I was not present) was that the play was quite spoilt by its faulty construction Nobody expected it to last very long That there was much virtue in "If" was admitted, it contained a good idea, badly handled Consequently, when I went much later to the St Martin's, the fact that the good idea had proved too strong for the bad handling had added greatly to my curiosity to see the play

The impression I received was just what the opinions I had read had led me to expect I went home in a state of exasperated pleasure The pleasure was a tribute to the opportunities which Lord Dunsany had taken, the exasperation due to those he had missed And now, having read the play, I find both these feelings confirmed It is not

on small points of stage-craft that I find myself so disappointed with this play. The device, for instance, of repeating the scene at the station word for word, except for the last few speeches, has been objected to as clumsy. Perhaps it is, but at least it has a definite purpose. And since in my own case it achieved that purpose without being tiresome I do not feel that I have the right to say anything against it.

Where I feel that Lord Dunsany's technique is seriously and fundamentally at fault is that he does not understand how to use the fantastic in humour, or, if not that, then that he does not understand the function of humour in fantasy. He has put together his play out of these two materials—humour and fantasy. His humour is Cockney, his fantasy is Oriental. Each is good of its kind. The second scene of the first act, in which we see John Beal in 1913—a happy and contented City Man in his suburban home—is quite admirable comedy. So is the scene in the second-class carriage, where John—having used the crystal to take him back to 1903, meets Miralda Clement for the first time, and so is started on the career which ends in his becoming an Oriental despot. And the Eastern scenes in the third act are quite admirable also, taken as scenes in the life of an Oriental despot, and without reference to the despot's antecedents. But they do not fit into the same play, and regarded as scenes from alternative lives of the same individual they become ridiculous. The John Beal of Act III is simply not the man of the previous acts at all. The first act is all humour and no Orientalism, the third is all Orientalism and no humour. This is where Lord

Dunsany throws away his chances, and where the play is spoilt by having no unity of conception

The biggest comic opportunities which this excellent theme gave its author were the results obtainable by emphasising the contrast between his two widely different materials. To get these results at their best it was necessary that the two materials should be skilfully interwoven, so that each should set off the other. Something of this the author realised, hence we have the second act, in which John, now in Al Shaldomir on Miralda's business, is joined by his smart young brother Archie, who arrives in a bowler hat. There were great possibilities in Archie for Act III, and I shall not easily forgive Lord Dunsany for slaughtering him off in the second *entr'acte*

I strongly suspect that it was not the author's original intention that Archie should die. I feel that when he got so far Lord Dunsany suddenly remembered that he has a reputation for poetical Orientalism, and decided that he must not play with it. Accordingly he began to take himself and his characters with portentous seriousness. John and Miralda lost their Cockney humour altogether, but Archie refused to do any such thing, he was altogether too alive. And so his death-warrant was signed. Unless the author intended to keep Archie in the third act, I can conceive no reason for his existing at all—except as a mere stage puppet of the "Charles his friend" type. And unless Lord Dunsany was frightened of Archie's probable devastating effect on that highly coloured third act, I can conceive no reason for his ceasing to exist. If Archie had been present, hold-

ing the rank of Vizier or something of the sort (but with the memory of the bowler hat ever present as a symbol), John and Miralda would never have become so lost to all sense of their former selves in six years as to converse in private in the imaginative Oriental style they had to use to their subjects Listen to this, and remember they are alone

JOHN I will have what fancies I please, crazy or sane Am I not Shereef of Shaldomir? Who dare stop me if I would be mad as Herod?

MIRALDA I will be crowned queen

JOHN It is not my wish

MIRALDA I will, I will, I will

JOHN Drive me not to anger If I have you cast into a well and take twenty of the fairest daughters of Al Shaldomir in your place, who can gainsay me?

In the second act Lord Dunsany uses this style quite legitimately and with success to represent that John is talking the native language—Persian But here John and Miralda are talking English, they must be, because she goes on in the next page

MIRALDA What would you have been doing now, but for me?

JOHN I don't know, Miralda

MIRALDA Catching some silly train to the City Working for some dull firm Living in some small suburban house It is I, I, that brought you from all that, and you won't make me a queen

That sounds more like the old Miralda, and I can't hear her saying it in Persian, somehow But I certainly cannot imagine John making English speeches in the high-falutin' style just quoted if Archie had been there Can't you see Archie's eyes twinkling when he heard it?

That, it seems to me, is where the contrast and the humour should have been maintained John, Miralda, and Archie should have been allowed to talk



among themselves in the racy, business-like Cockney of the act before, rising only into the figurative and high-flown style when they might reasonably be supposed to be talking Persian. The structure of the act need not have been materially altered, but its texture would have been both lightened and brightened. Then, if Archie had to be got rid of for the purposes of the last act, he could easily have been killed by the Bishareens, from whom John has to make his escape as the play stands.

Apart from this central fault, the construction of the play seems to be curiously uneven. It abounds in instances of good and of bad technique. There are, for instance, both constructional skill and careful attention to detail in the way in which the reader or spectator is made to understand and accept the supernatural workings of the talisman, and in the working out of the last scene. But there is badly scamped workmanship in the calm way in which the author dumps his characters down in Persia without a word of explanation how people of their type and position could afford time or money to go there. Such faults as this proceed from carelessness, or from the strong streak of amateurishness of which Lord Dunsany will have to rid himself before he can do his best work.

—10th November, 1921

## OLIVER CROMWELL

It is very much to Mr John Drinkwater's credit that he is his own best imitator. The success of "Abraham Lincoln" has produced a little flood of biographical plays, but none of them—so far as I am in a position to judge—is as good as "Oliver Cromwell," which Messrs Sidgwick and Jackson have just published. It is true that I have not seen Mr Halcott Glover's "Wat Tyler," recently produced at the old Vic, nor have I read "The King's Jewry," by the same author, of which some critics speak highly. But of those that I have seen or read—including those about Deburau, Byron, Shakespeare (both Miss Dane's "invention" and the more carefully historical version by Messrs Bax and Rubinstein), and possibly one or two more that I cannot recall at the moment—"Oliver Cromwell" seems to me to be the best.

That it reaches the height of achievement of the Lincoln play I do not feel, but I believe that this is less due to any diminution of Mr Drinkwater's powers than to an increase of difficulty in his subject. The worst of these historically accurate plays is their historical accuracy. Great men have an awkward way of living their lives as they come, never thinking of the obstacles they may be putting in the way of some dramatist of the future. Consequently, though

Mr Drinkwater has chosen as elastic a method as possible of presenting his subject, he cannot expect to find many heroes whose lives and characters lend themselves so aptly to dramatic form as did Lincoln's. The earlier play achieved a swift smoothness which is lacking in the later one. The scenes that portrayed Lincoln's call to power and the manner in which he carried through his great work seemed to carry you steadily forward without check or stop till you reached the sudden (and, as shown, motiveless) crime at the close. You had seen a complete action, beginning at the outset of Lincoln's public career and terminating with its close.

So simple and single-minded was Lincoln's purpose in life, and consequently so comparatively simple to dramatise, that Mr Drinkwater only needed five scenes (I speak from memory, somebody having abstracted my copy of the play—I hope only temporarily) in which to convey its essence. In "Oliver Cromwell" he needs eight, and few of those eight follow naturally out of one another. The result is that there is no smoothness at all. The effect is jerky. You are conscious that you are being given, not a man's whole life and character, but eight carefully selected and well-written scenes from a man's life, from which you are to deduce his character. The difference is, perhaps, not very big, but I feel that in this type of work it may make just the difference between a good play and a great play.

It seems to me that the success of "Abraham Lincoln" has led a good many people astray. They have appreciated it as biography at the expense of its worth as drama. Consequently they have leapt to

the conclusion that they have only to go to their histories and find a character as interesting as Lincoln to be sure of writing a successful play. I have heard people refer airily to "the coming form of biographical drama." They may be right, of course, time alone can prove. But in my own humble opinion "Abraham Lincoln" owes its stupendous success almost entirely to its value as drama, and hardly at all to its historical nature. The character of Lincoln inspired its author with enthusiasm, the circumstances of Lincoln's life lent themselves to stage treatment, and the result is the completest and most sincerely felt piece of character-drawing that our stage has seen for long past. I am not quite so bold as to say that if Lincoln were not an historical person, but a figment of Mr Drinkwater's brain, the play would have had an equal success, but I am not far from thinking so. "Oliver Cromwell," considered as a play only, does not give me this feeling. But considered as a biographical play—that is, as an attempt to adapt the events of the Protector's life to the narrow requirements of stage representation—it is a first-rate piece of writing, and will secure, when produced, a big following among those who have a personal admiration for Cromwell's character, or who prefer biography on the stage to drama.

As I have already mentioned, "Oliver Cromwell" is divided into eight scenes. In the first he is seen in his home at Ely, receiving a visit from John Hampden and Henry Ireton on the eve of his opposition to the enclosing of the common land by the Earl of Bedford. The second is at Westminster, where the Commons of England are passing the Humble

Remonstrance The scene ends with the discovery by Cromwell that an Ely man has been tortured by the Star Chamber for speaking against the ship-money extortion, and with the crystallisation of Cromwell's determination to put down all that the Star Chamber stands for "in this unhappy England" The third scene is again at Ely, after Edgehill Cromwell returns to his home to raise a regiment The fourth, three years later, is before Naseby, and the fifth—a tiny scene—takes place after the victory there Then we go forward two years again, and see Charles at his last desperate attempt at double-dealing, and its quite fortuitous discovery by Cromwell This leads inevitably to the seventh—a fine, restrained piece of work—at Cromwell's house in London on the day of Charles's execution, where Cromwell's mother, wife, and daughter with Henry Ireton (now his son-in-law) are waiting for news that all is over, which news is conveyed to the audience by the quiet entrance of Oliver, unobserved by his family, upon which the curtain is dropped And so to the last scene—a glimpse of Cromwell as Protector at the bedside of his dying mother

The whole action of the play covers fifteen years—1639 to 1654 During those years the diverse fortunes of King and Country underwent such vicissitudes that to cover them all in the action of a single play seems a hopeless task Mr Drinkwater has done wonders in this way, but the result is—as I hinted above—rather jerky and inconsecutive On the other hand, the character-drawing is admirable Mrs Cromwell the elder is a delightful old lady She is eighty when the play begins, and so is ninety-five

(though the book inexplicably says ninety) at its close. She is full of the wisdom and the wonderful detachment of the old whose powers are unimpaired. She admits sorrowfully that all that Oliver does is justified, while all the time deploring that human beings should be so selfish and foolish as to make such violent measures necessary. The Protector himself is well and surely drawn, full of the sense of being God's instrument, cool-headed and modest, and always a little regretful that he was not allowed to live his life out in peace at Ely. All the other characters are cleverly touched in, for Mr Drinkwater understands the stage.

I should like to add a short note on the actual texture of the play—the language in which it is written. A modern author writing an obsolete form of English is always faced with a difficulty in deciding just how closely he intends to reproduce the language of the period in question. As a rule, any attempt at exact representation destroys the illusion utterly. You cannot carry conviction so. Mr Drinkwater has evidently taken the view that by writing in the simplest possible English and avoiding polysyllables (and, of course, modernisms) you get a pure, dignified English, which is common to all periods, and can therefore represent any period. If I am correct in thinking that this is his deliberate theory, he has certainly made it a triumphant success in practice. I have analysed Oliver's long speech to the Mayor of Ely in Scene III. I apologise for the pedantry of the proceeding, but I think you will agree that the result is striking enough to justify me. The speech contains two hundred and sixty-five words, and only

eight out of all that number contain more than two syllables. There are two hundred and fifteen monosyllables. Even the eight should really be reduced to five, since "gentlemen" occurs three times (not as a formal address, but in its original sense of "men of breeding"), and that is not a real trisyllable, but has merely become one by some process of agglutination. You will see that simplicity of language could hardly go further, and to its effect I here bear witness

—1st December, 1921

## PLOT AND CHARACTER

THE collected edition of the plays of the late Hubert Henry Davies, just published by Messrs Chatto and Windus, is a book which every lover of the theatre should read. Davies never made any very great pretensions to depth, his work was light and sparkling always, and if (as Mr Hugh Walpole says in his very charming introduction) his last play "Outcast" shows a tendency towards something more serious, his unfortunate and untimely death during the war prevented that tendency from coming to anything. But it is doubtful whether—however serious he might have become, and however his powers might have deepened and strengthened—he would ever have written a better play than "The Mollusc." Into this delightful little comedy he has put the very best of himself. All the characters are clear-cut, humorous, effective dramatically, and true to life. Mrs Baxter, the Mollusc herself, is a marvellous creation. The stagecraft is a *tour de force* of dexterity, although there are actually only four characters in the whole comedy, the action is always natural. While you are reading the play, you are quite unconscious of its extreme technical skill. There are other charming plays in these two volumes. "Cousin Kate" and "Captain Drew on Leave," are quite excellent comedies, and there is much good work in "Doormats" and "A



Single Man " " Mrs Gorringer's Necklace," with its obvious imitation of Sir Arthur Pinero and its various immaturities, is a very good stage play, and " Out-cast," with its touch of sombre realism, is a meritorious piece of work in a field which was not yet the dramatist's own. This leaves one play to be mentioned—a play which is easily the worst of the eight, and in which most of the author's finest faculties seem to have deserted him. That play is " Lady Epping's Law-Suit ".

It may be thought a gross piece of injustice on my part to dismiss four or five good plays and two or three quite successful ones in a paragraph, and then to devote the greater part of four pages to the discussion of the one bad play in the book. But the fact is I am not here chiefly concerned with writing an appreciation of Davies's work as a whole so much as with finding out just why he failed in this play to do what he achieved in even the least considerable of his other works. (At this point I am seized by a horrible doubt. I never saw " Lady Epping's Law-Suit " on the stage, I see by the date in the book that I was still at school when it was produced. I am simply taking it for granted that it was a failure because I do not like the way it reads. These dots, as they say sometimes in novels, represent the passage of time, during which I have looked up a book of reference and discovered that the play only ran a few weeks. All is well! I can, therefore, discuss its failure with a tranquil mind.) I think Mr Walpole hits on the reason in his preface, where he points out the curious mixture of truth to life and staginess to be discovered in Davies's plays, and his difficulty in finding plots which should at once

be effective on the stage and yet should give him a chance to indulge in that drawing of human life as he saw it, which was the real essence of his work. In proportion as he succeeded in overcoming this difficulty, his plays are good, in proportion as he allowed their stage side to dominate him, they are bad. "The Mollusc," which is his best play, is wholly true to life. "Lady Epping's Law-Suit," his worst, is true only to stage traditions. Alone of his plays, "Lady Epping" bears a label, Davies described it as a "satirical comedy" (All the others are called "a comedy" except "Outcast," which is "a play"). This fact gives you its measure at once. You feel that all the time he was writing it Davies had to keep reminding himself to be satirical, to be cruelly clever. The result is that there is not a single likeable person in the play, more than that, there is not a single human being with the possible example of Evelyn Hughes, the hero's wife.

If you compare the bare outline of "Lady Epping" with that of any of the other plays there seems no earthly reason why this should not have been, at any rate, as good a play as—well, say as "Doormats." The story of how Lady Epping "took up" a successful young dramatist, read her unactable plays to him, flirted with him, came between him and his wife, quarrelled with him, and finally (out of pique) sued him for plagiarising one of the aforesaid unactable plays—all this sounds an excellent theme for a real Davies comedy. And if he had let himself grow interested in and fond of his characters, as he did in such plays as "The Mollusc" and "Cousin Kate," Lady Epping might have lived

much longer than those few weeks in the autumn of 1908. As it is the characters are all puppets which move only when Mr Davies jerks the strings. They are all exaggerated just a little. This note is struck from the beginning, where a lady journalist calls at Epping House to interview the new literary lion. Miss Ferris is not a real lady journalist. She is much more like what the typical lady journalist might be imagined to be than any good lady journalist would allow herself to become. Davies's usual way would have been to give us a real lady journalist, and to sympathise with her—at the same time realising, and showing us, that she had her human foibles like the rest of us. But no—he is out to be satirical, and satirical at all costs he must be. It is the same story in the court scene, which is evidently marked out to be the big scene of the play. Probably, one feels, it was a conception of how funny this last scene would be that inspired Davies to write it in the first place. And very funny that scene ought to have been—and isn't. The fact is, I think, that Davies in this play is all the time cramped and fettered by having too obviously thought of a good plot. He was really interested in character, and only so long as the plot was kept firmly in subjection to character could he write his best. In "The Mollusc," or "Captain Drew," the whole action depends on the possession of certain characteristics by the chief people of the play. Make Mrs Baxter different from what she is, and you have no story. Not until he had created Mrs Baxter in his mind could the dramatist have made the plot of "The Mollusc." But the plot of "Lady Epping" is self-sufficient. Its incidents could

happen to any silly woman who dabbled in play-writing Lady Epping herself is invented for the sole purpose of bringing a frivolous action to salve her outraged vanity, and so giving her creator a chance of poking satirical fun at the law It is worth noticing that in this play the judge and the barristers are all caricatures, and rather crude caricatures at that The foolish personal interludes between Mr Justice Wray and Lady Epping are better suited, say, to "Trial by Jury," than to a play which, whatever else you may call it, is certainly not a burlesque And so the great court scene misses fire But, now, imagine for one moment that Lady Epping had sprung full-grown from the brain of the author, as I am certain that Mrs Baxter did, suppose that she had been the living woman in the author's brain before ever he began on his first act, and it is impossible to doubt that she would have made of the court scene the memorable piece of stage writing that it must have appeared in prospect All of which goes to illustrate powerfully once more the fundamental truth that it is character and not plot that makes a play worth while How satisfactory it is to be able to finish naturally with so salutary a moral

—5th January, 1922

## LITTLE PITFALLS

IN "Old Jig" there is an Irish butler—a cheery soul, who behaves towards his master with easy equality, and generally considers himself the little ray of sunshine in the home. Quite a good character, and very well played. At one point in the first act, being about to lock up for the night, he makes a remark to the effect that if he omitted to do it they might all wake up next morning to find themselves dead. This is not a new remark, in fact, it is very, very old. You have often heard it before. So have I. So had the two young men sitting immediately in front of me at the first performance. I saw their heads converge suddenly. "I say," said one, in a shocked whisper, "that's old!" The other agreed, with a shocked nod, and the two heads diverged (or however you put it) once more. I have no doubt that those two youths subsequently spread round their immediate circle the report that "Old Jig" was an amusing and ingenious piece, but that the dialogue was full of chestnuts.

Well, I am not in a position to refute the idea. I do not know either of the authors of the play. So far as I am aware, I have never met Mr Douglas Hoare nor yet Mr Sydney Blow in our respective and separate lifetimes, and it follows therefore that they have given me no confidences as to their reasons for including that particular chestnut in their dialogue. But Messrs Blow and Hoare are practised playwrights, such as one does not wish lightly to suspect

of including chestnuts, either ignorantly or without a reason, and there is a possible reason for their insertion of this one, which I am going to assume, for the purposes of this article, to be true. It is that they were slyly poking fun at the propensity of Irish butlers to say sometimes exactly the kind of thing that a conventional Irish butler in a book or play is always supposed to say, but which in real life he says with disappointing infrequency. All types of men have this propensity now and then to behave like their stock stage prototypes. Every now and then I come across a housekeeper who says, "Oh, dearie, dearie me!" or a parson with a tendency to address his companions as "My brethren." I always feel happier for it. I shall never forget the deep and holy joy which I once experienced in the Finchley Road at hearing a British workman calling loudly on the inattentive heavens to strike him pink. This piece of observation—that people do in real life occasionally live up (or down) to their conventional stage selves—is obviously good material for the humorous writer. Every satirist uses it in one form or another. But it must be handled with care, and it must be labelled with even more care. It is over this labelling difficulty that I am assuming that Messrs Blow and Hoare have fallen into a little pitfall. They have omitted to make it clear that they are poking a little quiet fun at their Irish butler's tendency to produce Irish butlerisms. The result is that shocked young men in the audience accuse them (possibly with justice, as I must confess) of trying to pass the base coin of outworn clichés as the legal tender of sterling dialogue.

Dialogue is full of such little traps for the unwary playwright. It is such terribly ticklish stuff and so

terribly important. It must seem like ordinary speech, and yet in reality it must do and be all sorts of things which are quite outside the sphere of ordinary speech. No conversation you ever heard or took part in in your life could be transcribed verbatim and produced effectively on the stage. Once you begin to observe conversation with a view to reproducing it in a book or a play, you find that people repeat themselves and each other in a most maddening way. The earnest young writer's first instinct on discovering this is to reproduce it word for word—either as realism or as satire. In neither case are the results satisfactory. One example of each kind occurs to me. The new play, "The Eleventh Commandment," recently produced at the Royalty Theatre, supplies the first. Mr Brandon Fleming, having contrived a series of surprising discoveries to be made in his last act, has to make his characters "register" surprise. His method of doing this is to make the surprised person repeat in an incredulous tone the last few words spoken by the surpriser. I am afraid I cannot remember the exact words used, but I can illustrate the method easily enough. Take it that A is the surpriser, B the surprised.

A It turns out that Marian is a bad lot

B A bad lot? What do you mean?

A She has been living with a man

B With a man!

A Yes, for a year

B A year!

And so on

Well, I have no manner of doubt that Mr Fleming is perfectly right in thinking that a great many people would behave very much as B does in such circumstances—in real life. But on the stage the repetition

of the device becomes both boring and unconvincing. The audience's view of the playwright in such circumstances is, not that he is true to life, but that he is lacking in resource. In Mr Fleming's play it is Mr H. G. Stoker who is put most often in B's position, and though he struggles manfully to give to his vain repetitions an illusion of life, they are too much—or rather, too many—for him in the end. It is the impression of life that is wanted, not a transcription.

My second instance, of a dramatist who reproduced the talk of every day for satirical purposes with too great exactness, comes, unfortunately, from a forgotten play, you cannot, therefore, pay a visit to it and witness if I lie. The play in question was staged by one of the play-producing societies for a special *matinée*. Its title and its author's name are gone from me, but I remember it was a "spoof" crook play, in which Mr Baliol Holloway was the chief criminal and had a Spanish wife, and that the character I am now concerned with was a talkative old maid, played by Miss Jean Cadell. Every playgoer knows the touch of individual genius that Miss Cadell brings to her studies of elderly spinsters, and I rather imagine that when the author of this play secured Miss Cadell for the part he hoped that he and she would secure a joint triumph, which would assure a West End run for the play. The character was transcribed from life with devastating exactness, she was one of those women who say twice over everything they do say, sometimes with a connecting "I mean" between the original statement and its echo. I have met one or two such people in real life, and am free to confess that they drive me as near insanity as I have any desire to go. And since the author was not



content to give an impression of the lady's character—since he left nothing to the imagination, but plumped her down straight on the stage just as I had known her in life—she naturally had the same effect on me and my companions as her prototype. Miss Cadell's personality and resource kept the character humorous for a short while, but soon even she was drowned in the appalling spate of verbiage, after which we were defenceless against the dreadful boredom of the character herself. It was rather as though Polonius had broken loose and insisted on being the central figure in "Hamlet."

Of course, the little pitfalls which trip you up if you get too near to life are as nothing compared with the yawning chasms which await you if you get too far away from it. Stage dialogue should seldom be made of all the things people do say. It should, however, always be selected from the things those same people might say—for the essence of the dramatist's art, more perhaps than any other, is selection. It should never under any circumstances be made (as it so often is) of things that people do not say. This is, no doubt, a "glimpse of the obvious," but to my mind it needs to be said. I don't know if I am peculiarly sensitive to bad dialogue, but when I hear unfortunate actors compelled to utter sentiments of the *Family Herald* type it makes me writhe in my seat. It affects me physically in the pit of the stomach exactly as the scenic railway used to. At such dreadful moments—and they are not rare—it is only a high sense of duty, backed by a strong effort of will, that enables me to look at the stage at all. I want to hide my eyes and blush.

—26th January, 1922

## ABOUT THE THEATRE



## FIRST-NIGHT AUDIENCES

MR MAX BEERBOHM, in "Seven Men," makes the statement that at one time he abandoned the habit of going to first nights, for the reason that he was tired of seeing exactly the same people every time he went to the theatre. Mr Beerbohm was writing of some decades ago, but the confirmed "first-nighter" is no less assiduous to-day. The stalls at any one first night look exactly as they did on the immediately preceding first night, they might have been transferred *en bloc* from one theatre to the other, with a certain amount of shuffling on the way. This stalls audience (apart from the professional critics, who are on business, and therefore do not count) divides itself into two classes—those who have come to see the play and, incidentally, each other, and those who have come to see each other, and, incidentally, the play. In the intervals between the acts, the first night becomes a society function. Nobody knows everybody, but everybody knows somebody, and a sensitive and solitary stranger, knowing nobody, who happened to drop in merely to see the play, would feel almost as lonely and out of place as if he had gone to a party at the wrong house.

But it is not only the stalls which display uniformity of appearance. All over the house the same thing happens. The dress circle is nothing more than an overflow meeting from the stalls, consisting of

those who applied too late or were not well enough known to be allotted the seats of the mighty. The upper circle has its own first-night subscription list, which must (like the gallery) consist of single-hearted devotees of the drama, because of the impossibility of seeing anything from those eminences but the stage, while the pit contains its particular and special blend of those to whom "the play's the thing," and those to whom the real attraction is the opportunity of gazing at close quarters upon the notabilities in the stalls.

This very rough analysis applies with equal truth to the present-day first-night audience and to that of some years back, but if Mr Beerbohm now took once again to attending first nights he would notice that in the audience of to-day there is a great and fundamental difference from an audience of the time referred to in "Savonarola Brown." It is less critical, it knows less about the theatre, and it is more easily pleased than its predecessor. The change is of such recent growth that there seems to be only one assignable cause for it—the war. But it is so easy to give the war as a reason for any and every development of modern life that it is, perhaps, worth while to give a piece of definite evidence to prove that shortly before the war the change had not taken place. In 1912 Mr William Archer, in his standard work on dramatic craftsmanship, "Playmaking," made the following remarks: "It is this first-night audience which in great measure determines a play's success or failure. Many plays have survived a first night failure, and still more have gone off in a rapid decline after a first-night success. But these caprices of fortune are not to be counted on. The only prudent

course is for the dramatist to direct all his thought and care towards conciliating or dominating an audience to which his theme is entirely unknown, and so coming triumphant through his first-night ordeal "

In 1912, then, a first-night audience might still be relied upon—in the great majority of cases—to turn down its thumbs for a bad play In 1920 it is no longer so The average first-night audience to-day seems inclined to swallow almost anything with a pleased smile Play after play which has neither deserved nor subsequently achieved any length of run has nevertheless been " enthusiastically received " on its opening night The change is too marked to be merely superficial, and the only event big enough to have produced it in the last eight years is the war

In fact, it is not difficult to see how it all came about The war has produced an enormous shifting of wealth in this country, and this is at the bottom of the whole matter The composition of an average stalls audience to-day is not greatly different from what it was in 1912 It consists, broadly, of the stage, of society, and of those who would like to be in society The chief difference is that in 1912 this last class was composed of respectable people whose increasing prosperity had gradually led them to desert the upper circle, while to-day that class consists largely of vulgar profiteers, whose sudden wealth has enabled them to migrate direct from the pit or the gallery, bringing (in some regrettable cases) their oranges with them But after all, the opinions of the stalls can have little real effect upon the fate of a play, their decorous code prevents it

It is not from the stalls that the uproarious

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applause, the cries of "Author!" and "Speech!" emanate, which ought to mean that the play is an assured success. The mouthpiece of an audience is its pit—assisted by its gallery, and it is in the first-night audience of the pit that the shifting of wealth seems to have had its most important effect. In 1912 this audience consisted to a great extent of enthusiastic experts, who made it a point of honour to attend every first night, and were ready to stand patiently in a queue for untold hours in order to gratify their ruling passion. They were drawn from every class—the only point in common being that they could not afford more expensive seats—and their knowledge of plays, players, and people was extraordinary. It was a liberal education to listen to them, whether they discussed the piece, the acting, or the occupants of the stalls in front of them. Before the curtain rose this old guard of the pit made it a point of honour to recognise everybody of any eminence—particularly stage eminence—who entered the stalls. During the intervals their criticisms of the play were sound, assured, and based on years of experience. After the curtain fell their applause, if deserved, was generous. They were self-constituted critics, with a real sense of their responsibilities in that high calling. To-day, according to the standards of life in 1912, it costs the equivalent of six shillings to go to the pit. The old guard's traditions have in consequence been handed over for safe keeping to a new section of the community, a section brought up without any definite interest in or knowledge of the theatre, and lacking the experience necessary to enable it to discriminate between good and bad. It does its uninstructed best

to carry on the tradition, but there is no subtlety in its appreciations, so long as its senses are pleasantly tickled somehow, it is ready with its facile approbation.

It may perhaps be possible to ascribe this failure to discriminate in part to the influence of the cinematograph. The coming of the moving-picture theatre, with its capacity for infinite reduplication of its plays, its accessibility, its cheapness, has inevitably had the effect of extending the appeal of the theatre in general, but, while bringing into being a larger public to be entertained, the cinema has hitherto tended to keep that public in an uncritical and unsophisticated state of mind. The film, as it exists to-day, has a curiously uneven standard of excellence, due to the great number of cheap American pictures which flood the market. One nation cannot really be expected to revel in another nation's humour, and the cinema public has in consequence become inured to the experience of sitting patiently through unfunny "comics" and ridiculous sentimentalities for the sake of one finely-produced and gripping picture which it really came to see.

It is in the same spirit, apparently, that the new amateur critics of the London stage come to the theatre. They are ready to be pleased on the smallest provocation. This tendency is much helped by the extremely high technical standard of acting which the present-day stage has, generally speaking, to offer. In consequence, the "first-night ordeal" has almost ceased to be an ordeal, in this one respect, at any rate. And yet—probably both playwright and actors would prefer it to be a real ordeal, after all. If "the first-night audience in great measure determines a play's



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success," then the first night does at least end the suspense. A first-night audience determined to be pleased is about as much use as the well-meaning but uncandid friend who, pressed for a searching criticism, reads through a young author's manuscript and says, "Yes, very nice indeed!"

—19th February, 1920

## THE DECAY OF PURITANISM

IN the year 1583, though England was still "Merrie England," and Puritanism was only beginning to make itself felt, one Phillip Stubbes produced a downright piece of prose called "The Anatomy of Abuses," in which, with the true Puritan fervour, he attacked the sins of his contemporaries. He found much material ready to his hand, for Merrie England was pretty frank and light-hearted about its lapses from the strict moral code. But Stubbes made the common Puritan error (as the critics of his own time did not fail to point out) of extending his strictures on "abuses" to include the things abused. He ruthlessly condemned so many things that, according to him, nothing in life that was pleasant was permissible. He inveighed fiercely against the theatre, largely because of the licentious behaviour of those who went to see "filthie playes and enterluds", he regarded it as "blasphemie intolerable" that anyone should consider that plays might be "as good as sermons."

The May-games of that time were also made an excuse for a considerable amount of licence, and Stubbes in consequence allowed himself to refer to the unoffending Maypole as a "stinking Ydol". He seems, indeed, to have been carried away by the fervour of his own pen, for it is interesting to note that he first wrote a preface to his book, pointing out that it was only to the abuses he objected, that certain

plays were innocuous, and that dancing in private was innocent. But this preface clashed so violently with the tone of the book itself that it was subsequently omitted. This little fact might serve as an epitome of the Puritan movement, and explain why, when at last they attained to power, they swept away everything that had made "Merrie England" and turned us into a people with a reputation for taking our pleasures sadly. The Maypole was forbidden by law in 1644 (in the same spirit a modern reformer might seek to put down Bank Holiday excesses by abolishing banks). The strolling players were treated as the rogues and vagabonds they legally were. No longer did the people flock to the inn-yards to see "playes and enterludes on stages and scaffolds." Instead, they sat at home shivering at the prospect of eternal damnation.

The Puritan movement had begun in righteous anger, but devolved before long into rancorous prejudice, the Puritans preached freedom and practised tyranny. The Pilgrim Fathers themselves, who had sailed away from England in search of freedom, celebrated their emancipation by massacring Red Indians and by executing Quakers, both in the sacred name of religion. Against a creed capable of such excesses a violent reaction was inevitable. The Restoration in 1660 swept the Puritans out of power, and seemed to have done away with their influence. Society in London flew from one extreme to the other, and attained a degree of polished licentiousness which is reflected in the comedies of the period—work so permeated with artificial viciousness that not only the works of Aphra Behn (a past-

mistress of the art), but even those of Congreve or Wycherley are found unfit for our stage. Lamb convinced himself that these Restoration writers dealt not with the world as they knew it, but with "a world of themselves almost as much as fairyland." Leigh Hunt, however, ascribed this to Lamb's anxiety "to believe the best of everything," and insists that the London of that time was as non-moral as its dramatists painted it. In fact, London was defying the Puritans. Here, again, the Maypole is a sign of the times, for in 1661 the law of seventeen years before was repealed, and a pole of magnificent proportions was erected in the capital. But the country in general did not follow suit. Puritanism was dying, but the attitude of mind of its adherents remained. "Merrie" England had disappeared, with all its frank faults and its equally frank virtues. May-games and stage-plays were looked at askance by those who had been brought up to believe that most things that were pleasant were of necessity bad, and under this narrow and repressive creed all England save the most enlightened class has groaned ever since. It is to the Puritans that we owe the abysmal gloom of the English Sunday, and to them also we owe all the die-hard prejudice against the stage, against dancing, against (it would almost seem) happiness in any form.

But the iron grip is slipping at last. Over the last generation it still had a firm hold, but over the present one its power survives only here and there, in cases which are either mentally or geographically out of the stream of progress. No longer does the rector of a parish turn away his face and pass by on

the other side when he meets "play-actresses" (Why, by the way, should it convey such a subtle insult to use the hyphenated form of this word?) Instead, he asks them to tea at the rectory, and his wife does her best to persuade them to give their services at her next concert in the parish hall. The type of man who used to hold that the theatre was a sink of iniquity and all "play-actors" were rogues and libertines would usually go on to tell you that he had never in his life been inside a theatre, and, God helping him, never would. If you asked if he had ever known an actor the answer was in the deeply insulted negative. There are, no doubt, plenty of these people about still, but where they were once in a huge majority their numbers are now comparatively insignificant. They no longer rule public opinion.

One sign that the day of prejudice is gone at last is found in the fact that in many parts of the country there are springing up movements to establish village plays of different kinds. Some of these organisations produce Shakespeare, some more modern plays, while others go boldly on the principle laid down by the old lady who declined the district-visitor's offer to read Keats to her—"Thank you, miss, but when I wants poetry I makes it." I am informed that there is one village in Surrey which is to produce some time next month a play written by a local resident, on a distinctly local theme—an imaginary story of how the frescoes in the village church, which date from the eleventh century, came to be painted. The theatre in which the play will be acted is a chalk pit, all the actors are drawn from the village, and all the costumes have been made on the spot. This sounds

very much like the ideal With movements such as this springing up spontaneously in different parts of the country, it is plain that a wider and more sympathetic spirit towards drama in general must have come into being somehow it remains to foster that spirit and to see that such movements, without losing their spontaneity, receive just the degree of expert help and advice necessary to assure them of success It is exactly here that the British Drama League has a field for its most useful activity This society does not make the mistake of trying to "run" village plays Rather does it exercise a kind of unofficial suzerainty, its policy is to keep in touch with all branches of the movement, while encouraging villages to produce their plays themselves with as little outside aid as possible But should they want assistance, there is the league ready to give it This, it seems to me, is exactly the right attitude The Puritan-born prejudice against art in all forms seems to be passing away at last If the new idea which is growing up is to have any real strength it must not be treated like a hothouse plant It must be left to grow of itself in the open, with the help of a little judicious watering Then, perhaps, we shall in time attain to an England which shall be "Merrie" again—without, it is to be hoped, giving cause for a second Stubbes to raise his voice in thunderous protest against its abuses

—10th June, 1920

## HAZLITT AND HIS POINT OF VIEW

“ To read a good comedy is to keep the best company in the world, where the best things are said and the most amusing happen. The wittiest remarks are always ready on the tongue, and the luckiest occasions are always at hand to give birth to the happiest conceptions. We would give our fingers to talk so ourselves or to hear others talk so. In turning over the pages of the best comedies we are almost transported to another world, and escape from this dull age to one that was all life, and whim, and mirth, and humour ”

This passage occurs in William Hazlitt's essay on the Restoration Comedy. The beginning of the next paragraph of the same essay runs: “ The four principal writers of this style of comedy (which I think the best) are undoubtedly Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar. The dawn was in Etherege, as its latest close was in Sheridan ”

It is just about a hundred years ago since Hazlitt began to write his criticisms, and it would be hard to find another passage which is better calculated to bring home to our minds what a fundamental change that century has brought about in our ideas of comedy. At first glance, it is true, Hazlitt's words have a specious air of modernity. Some of them might be applied to any well-written light piece of present times—“ Home and Beauty,” for instance, or “ Mr

Pim Passes By ” It does not offend our sense of what is fitting to say of these two plays that “ the wittiest remarks are always ready on the tongue,” nor would Messrs Somerset Maugham and Milne be likely to institute proceedings for libel if we said that they had done their best to arrange that the luckiest occasions should always be at hand to give birth to the happiest conceptions. But if Hazlitt himself could return to pass judgment on these or any other of our modern light comedies, he would probably repeat the accusation which Pope in his time levelled at one of the very writers whom Hazlitt praises so highly—“ What pert, low dialogue has Farquhar writ ”

The fundamental difference between Hazlitt’s point of view (with which his critical contemporaries Lamb and—to some extent—Leigh Hunt are in agreement) and that of to-day is that they considered that it was the function of comedy to ensure that its audience was “ transported to another world,” while we demand a humorous but unmistakable picture of the world we live in. The world of the Restoration, where none but society and its hangers-on went to the theatre, was artificial, and demanded an artificial comedy, dealing only with that society and those hangers-on. In our day the scope of comedy has broadened with that of its audience. Everybody, from duke to dustman, goes to the theatre, and consequently with everybody from duke to dustman does the contemporary dramatist deal. Hazlitt, writing at a time when contemporary drama was producing nothing worth while, took his colour from the period immediately preceding him.



Certainly his preference for the artificial was deliberate enough, and his choice was made with eyes wide open. Later in the essay from which I have already quoted, when he comes to the discussion of Congreve, he shows this very plainly. "In thinking of *Millamant*, we think almost as much of her dress as of her person, it is not so with respect to *Rosalind* or *Perdita*. The interest we feel is in themselves, the admiration they excite is for themselves. They do not depend upon the drapery of circumstance. It is nature that 'blazons herself' in them. *Imogen* is the same in a lowly cave as in a court, nay more, for she there seems something heavenly—a spirit or a vision, and, as it were, shames her destiny, brighter for the foil of circumstance. *Millamant* is nothing but a fine lady, and all her airs and affectation would be blown away with the first breath of misfortune. Envious in drawing-rooms, adorable at her toilette, fashion, like a witch, has thrown its spell round her, but if that spell were broken, her power of fascination would be gone. For that reason I think the character better suited for the stage, it is more artificial, more theatrical, more meretricious. I would rather have seen Mrs Abington's *Millamant* than any *Rosalind* that ever appeared on the stage." This extract is becoming rather a long one—once you begin quoting from a man who could write prose like this it becomes increasingly difficult to stop. One sentence more we must have, however, for it sums up the whole. "Somehow, this sort of acquired elegance is more a thing of costume, of air and manner, and in comedy, or on the comic stage, the light and familiar, the trifling, superficial and agreeable, bears, perhaps,

rightful sway over that which touches the affections or exhausts the fancy "

Here is a definite decision, or assumption, that the excellence of Restoration light comedy lies in its airy fantasy and unlikeness to life. Lamb, in his essay on the same subject, is in agreement. "I feel the better always," he says, "for one of Congreve's comedies. I am the gayer at least for it, and I could never connect those sports of a witty fancy in any shape with any result to be drawn from them to imitation in real life. They are a world of themselves, almost as much as fairyland "

The truth seems to be that Hazlitt and Lamb (who, besides being the greatest critics of their day, were two of the kindest men who ever wielded a pen) insisted on the remoteness from real life of these plays because it was only in this way that they could tolerate their grossness and inverted morality. But to praise them for being unlike life is wilfully to misunderstand the purpose with which they were written. At the time of their production these comedies presented a picture of London life little, if at all, exaggerated. It was a period of artificial wickedness—a natural reaction from that of equally artificial "goodness" which preceded it. After the sober speech of the Puritans, society flew to the other extreme and delighted in exhibitions of verbal dexterity. Every fine gentleman was, or aspired to be, a "wit", and the sublimated essence of this wit has been handed down to us in the light comedies of that day. The brilliance of those comedies blinded the eyes of the writers who came after, and made them believe that their own business was rather to transcend real life than

to imitate it People in plays were made to talk in such a way that no ordinary mortal could have stood what Gilbert used to call the "intellectual pressure of the conversation"

Not until our own time has the stage got really clear of this notion, for not until recent years has "natural" dialogue entirely come into its own With "natural" dialogue, the playwright's aim must be not so much wit as humour It is not so much what the character in a play says that tells, but how and when he says it Nobody could say of the modern light comedy, "We would give our fingers to talk so ourselves or to hear others talk so" Most of the point of the dialogue of these plays consists in our recognition that we ourselves, or, at any rate, our neighbours and friends, do "talk so" The conversation in "Mr Pim Passes By," for instance, may be of a higher standard than we could rely on getting from the occupants of the average country house, but it does not seem so on the stage It sounds like easy chatter, and gives the man in the stalls the feeling that it would be rather pleasant, and not at all disconcerting, to find himself staying in the house with these people and talking just such easy chatter too He might, after the experience, pronounce these play-people "the best company in the world", but he would mean by that something very different from Hazlitt's feelings towards Millamant when he first invented the phrase If Hazlitt had really been forced to associate for a time with his overpowering "best company," we can imagine with what joy and relief he would return to his quiet gossip over the tea-cups with the friends of his own "dull age"

—7th October, 1920

## THE POOR AUTHOR

WHEN Mr George Bernard Shaw, in his induction to "Fanny's First Play," put into the mouth of Mr Flawner Bannal the famous dictum, "If it's by a good author, it's a good play, naturally, that stands to reason," was he enunciating a great truth, or just titillating our ears? You remember the description of Flawner Bannal given by one of the other characters (of course, I know that you can't remember it really, unless for some reason you happen to have got the play by heart, that is only a recognised literary method of warning you that I am about to quote the passage in question), "Bannal really represents the British play-goer. When he likes a thing, you may take your oath there are a hundred thousand people in London that'll like it if they can only be got to know about it. He's the man in the street." Taking these two quotations in conjunction, we get a very clear inference that the man in the street thinks a play is good because it is by a good author. But does he? Does the man in the street even bother his head to find out who the author is? Does he not, rather—but if I use any more question marks this article will begin to look like an examination paper. I will therefore close my paragraph here, and begin another by considering what, if anything, the man in the street does think on this point.

If you come to think of it, there are very few authors who really mean anything at all to the man in the street. Except in the case of plays by a few men right at the head of their profession, he does not go to a play because anybody in particular has written it, but because he heard somebody at the club say it was a good show, or because his housemaid's young man took her to the pit last Saturday, and she has been telling his wife details of the plot, the dresses, and the appearance of the hero by instalments ever since. The few exceptions—men like Barrie, Galsworthy, Shaw himself—are themselves not immune from such treatment. Some weeks ago a man came to me for advice where to take his wife for an evening's amusement. I suggested "The Skin Game." He nodded. "Ah, yes," he said. "I've heard that it's rather good. At the St Martin's, isn't it? Who's it by?" That is the kind of thing that dramatic authors have to put up with. And the worst of it is that this man didn't really want to know who the play was by, and didn't wait for me to tell him, but went straight on to talk of something else. But as a general rule one can take it that people who go to plays by men of the eminence of Barrie, Galsworthy, and Shaw do go because they know by experience that these are "good authors," and therefore they expect the plays to be good, and perhaps people are more inclined to acclaim these plays as "good" than they would be if the same plays came to them over the unknown signature of Mr P. Q. Tompkins.

It would be very interesting if we could lay our finger on the exact point in a playwright's career where his name begins to be a real asset to the box-

office The unknown Mr P Q Tompkins (by the way, if there is a real P Q Tompkins among the multitudes of aspiring playwrights, I can only apologise for inadvertently taking his unusual name in vain) writes a play, "The Purple Peril," which has a long and successful run It is put before the public in these terms

253RD PERFORMANCE  
ARCHIBALD ALWRIGHT  
AND  
JOY JEWELL  
IN  
THE PURPLE PERIL  
BY  
P Q TOMPKINS

Mr Tompkins attains some small measure of fame When he walks abroad in the neighbourhood of the theatre, or goes to a first night, people point him out to one another "I say," the man who has met Tompkins will say, "see that fellow crossing the street there, in a brown suit and bowler hat? Well, that's P Q Tompkins" His companion is quite unimpressed "Who's P Q Tompkins?" she asks "Why, author of 'The Purple Peril'" She wrinkles her brows, trying to remember what "The Purple Peril" is, and rather inclined to place it as the last novel but three she got out of the library "The play at the 'Novelty,'" he explains, rather irritated at the failure of his little piece of exclusive information "Oh! Of course! How stupid of me! Did he write it? How funny—I thought it was by Knoblock" Then, casting forward into the dim future, we see another announcement

## 212 THROUGH THE FOURTH WALL

ARCHIBALD ALWRIGHT

PRESENTS

SIR PHINEAS Q TOMPKINS'

NEW PLAY

THE STAIN ON THE WALL

Between the two announcements are years of hard work and disappointment, and somewhere in those years comes the turning-point, after which the man who points out P Q Tompkins in the street is certain of causing a flutter of interest "No, really! Where? Oh, that little man! He looks very ordinary "

Any playwright who is to attain eminence such as this must have something in his work which attracts a public of his own—a faithful and increasing body, who will follow his work. Among the thousands who see that first success, "The Purple Peril," there is a small handful who, on the way home, feel that they have enjoyed themselves more than they usually do at the theatre. They fish crumpled programmes out of their pockets and look for the author's name. "P Q Tompkins," they say, with a shake of the head. "Never heard of him. I must go to the next thing he writes." The handful grows and spreads, until at length the mere mention of the author's name is enough to perform the miracle known as "drawing all London." It is rather a curious fact that farce-writers, whose work draws larger crowds than any other form of entertainment, seldom attain personal eminence in this way.

If you doubt this statement, think of a few of the stupendously successful farces of recent years, and see if you know the name of the author. Who wrote, for instance, "When Knights were Bold," "A Little

Bit of Fluff," and " Lord Richard in the Pantry " ? I am free to confess that I cannot answer any of these questions off-hand myself, though a name sticks in my mind in connection with the last-named, but on looking at the advertisement column of my paper to verify it, I find that the name of the author is not even mentioned there. I suppose the reason here is that the achievement of a successful farce is largely an accident which does not often happen twice to the same man, for the only writer whom I can call to mind at the moment who wrote many good farces also made his name in the process—a name which he has since made greater in other fields—Sir Arthur Pinero.

I began with a quotation from " Fanny's First Play " I will end with a quotation from its preface—the shortest which its author ever wrote. Referring to his concealment of the authorship of the play until after its production, Mr Shaw says, " It operated as a measure of relief to those critics and play-goers who are so obsessed by my strained literary reputation that they approach my plays in a condition which is really one of derangement. If it were possible, I should put forth all my plays anonymously, or hire some less disturbing person, as Bacon is said to have hired Shakespeare, to father my plays for me " Mr Shaw, having the good fortune to be one of the few authors who would suffer by the suppression of his name, wisely recognises that the idea is impossible.

—4th November, 1920.



## ON REVISITING PLAYS

THERE are some people who would as soon think of going twice to the same play or of reading a book over again, however much it had thrilled them or tickled their fancy, as they would of getting born or buried twice. On the other hand, there are people who will go (like the famous Grandee of Spain),

“ Not once and again,  
But again and again  
And again and again and again,”

to anything which happens to “ get ” them. I am not referring here to the impressionable young man of wealth who earmarks a stall as a token of his personal regard for the lady of the chorus whose smile has annexed his heart for the time being. Rather do I mean people of more enduring fibre, such as the wonderful woman, of whom the Daly’s people were so justly proud, who went forty-nine times (or four hundred and ninety or four thousand nine hundred—I forget the exact number) to see “ The Maid of the Mountains ”. For myself, if a book really appeals to me, I read it again at once as a matter of course, without prejudice to the number of times I shall re-read it in the future, while if I really enjoy a play on the first night, I always take an early opportunity of seeing it again.

The pleasure of the second visit is certainly not less than that of the first. It is different in kind from

the first, and is complementary to it, so that when I come across a play that really charms or thrills me, I never feel that I have had my fill of pleasure from it until after the second time of seeing it. On the first night, when you see a play of which you know, or are supposed to know, nothing, it is the dramatist who engages your chief attention. You are concerned with the unfolding and development of the theme before all else. In fact, the play's—no, with a noble effort I will refrain from quoting that well-worn tag from Hamlet, and simply state that the play is really all that matters, the story, and how it is told, the characters, and how they react upon one another. The actors take a subsidiary place, unavoidably, you simply have not time to observe the acting minutely so long as the dramatist is holding your intellect and emotions in play. Consequently, while the first performance of a really interesting play is going on, you are only able to get a general impression of the acting. During the intervals, and after the final curtain, you come back to earth, and you find that your general idea as to the merit or otherwise of each player's work is quite definite and clear-cut, but during the act you are concerned not with the actors, but with the characters they represent, and often it is only when the actor goes badly off the rails that you are conscious of him at all.

It is not so at your second visit. Your pleasure then is not in the broad effect, but in the details which are its cause. You are no longer concerned to know whether the hero is going to discover the poison in the bottle of burgundy or not, you know that. What you are now after is to see just how the dramatist and the

actors combine to produce in you that thrill which sent you home so happy last time. You need no longer sit with your whole attention glued to the central figures for the time being. You can let your observation stray and take note of smaller matters. In short, your chief enjoyment is no longer dependent on the work of the dramatist, but in the interpretation of that work.

I suppose that, in order to be able to extract real enjoyment out of a play so seen, you have to be blessed or cursed with that natural inquisitiveness which makes you want to "see the wheels go round." To me, certainly, there is as much pleasure in watching the actors working up to a known crisis as there was in the thrill of that crisis when it first came upon me. In the island scene in "Mary Rose," for example, I was every bit as deeply stirred by Mary Rose's disappearance the second time I went (though I knew the exact moment at which to expect it) as when, at the first performance, I had only the strong suspicion that—in all the circumstances—she was practically certain to disappear before the act concluded. It is not every enthusiast on the subject of the theatre who is interested in acting for its own sake. There have been—indeed, there still are—eminent critics who make very little effort to disguise the fact that their interest begins and ends with the work of the dramatist. They demand, of course, a certain standard of competence in the performance of the play. If an actor falls below the standard they are hurt, if another actor rises above that standard they are correspondingly pleased, and they record the fact. But, at the same time, it is plain that they regard the

actor only as an instrument in the hands of the dramatist and his producer, with the methods by which the actor obtains his effects they do not concern themselves

I do not know how it feels to be like that, but I take it that a man of the type I have described could only sit through a play the second time if it happened to be a work of a more than ordinarily stimulating nature, or if he felt that the dramatist had used certain arguments or put forward certain ideas which were too profound or too complicated to be thoroughly grasped at a first hearing. In fact, I imagine that such a man would rather get hold of a printed copy of the play in question and wrestle in private with its problems than go to the theatre and see it again. In the theatre he would be unable, perhaps, to get the concentration of mind which he would be sure of obtaining in his study. The acting, so far from being a joy to him, would become a hindrance. But the man who does like acting for itself can always find some new point of interest at each visit (within certain limits) to any play that has any intellectual value at all.

I am not saying that, in order to qualify as a real patron of "the profession," you should have to emulate the performance of the "Maid of the Mountains" lady hereinbefore mentioned, on the contrary, I have always considered her a case simply of pathological interest. But I do suggest that a man who regards acting as being something more than a knack of interpretation ought to be able to get more real enjoyment out of seeing a good play three times, and giving himself a chance of appreciating fully the work of

everybody concerned, than he would by seeing three different plays of only average merit. Unfortunately, it is only now and again that we get a play which really demands to be seen more than once. Usually the dramatist fails to keep your attention glued to his particular problems, and your mind goes off to other things, and you begin consciously to appraise the acting, so that by the time the last curtain falls, there is nothing left for you to come back for. In fact, it is a really memorable achievement on the dramatist's part when he sends you home saying not merely, "I liked that play," but "I must see that play again soon."

—14th December, 1920

## CHILDREN AND PANTOMIME

EVERY Christmas the pantomimes revive, every year the hoary old jests about the pantomime get a new lease of life somewhere. I expect that on the day this article sees the light some paper will be printing a version of that dear old yarn in which grandfather exclaims with glee, "Look, Bobby—the Harlequinade!" and Bobby, aged twelve, conceals a yawn and replies wearily, "Righto! Shall we clear?" Every year somebody will explain how perfectly absurd it is to pretend that it is for children that the pantomime is intended, and each year children flock to the pantomime, and are enthralled. It is perverse of them, but it is the truth. They enjoy every moment of these highly unsuitable entertainments, and the theorists, confronted with plain facts, have to fall back on their second line of defence and say how deplorable it is that it should be so. "What is a pantomime?" they ask, indignantly. "Why, simply a revue in disguise, with an admixture of music-hall low comedy. The same silly songs, the same sophisticated jokes, only strung on to a fairy-tale setting." And they are right, there is no doubt about it. These things are not calculated to amuse children. And yet if you take a child to a pantomime your chief feeling is that you must have mislaid the true art of enjoyment somewhere in your own lost years.

The mystery has such a simple solution. The child does not worry its head about the parts of the pantomime which cause such heartburnings to its elders. It does not notice them—is hardly aware of their existence. A child's whole life is spent in ignoring or setting aside the things it cannot understand and concentrating on the things which it can appreciate. It is, I suppose, all bound up with the same feeling which makes a child love to be talked to in grown-up polysyllables without having the least desire to know what those polysyllables mean. Children hate being witted, talked, or acted down to. Consequently they are quite happy, in the theatre, to take the unintelligible on trust, uncritical and quite untroubled. A pantomime, to an imaginative child who knows its fairy-tales, is simply one of those fairy-tales miraculously come true. So long as the main story is just what it is in the book, no amount of interpolated unintelligible grown-up stuff has any real importance. The small boy or girl will make no objection if Cinderella's ugly sisters while away their time at home by white-washing the ceiling after an amateur and merry style of their own, or by singing songs about wanting to go back to their homes in Tennessee. After all, it does not say in the book that they did not do those things, and presumably they must have had some kind of hobbies—why not these? But try tampering with the text—make the sisters not ugly enough, or not unpleasant enough, or let there be three of them, and see what the nursery has to say then!

The fact is, the people who say that pantomimes are not for children have forgotten their own childhood.

They have forgotten how they admired the royal bearing of the fairy prince ("Fancy having a fat woman in tights for your hero"), how they screamed with laughter at the funny man, ("Really, my dear, some of the things he says are so awful you hardly know where to look"), how they were entranced by the beauty of the princess ("Why doesn't somebody teach that girl how to hold herself?") Or, if they do remember, they get out of it by saying, "Ah! yes, but in my young days the pantomimes were very different" Were they? These good people forget that where their own sophisticated eyes see only tawdriness and vulgarity and second-class acting, the eyes of the children see fairyland I have myself, for instance, certain most vivid memories of the first two pantomimes I ever saw—"Cinderella" and "Blue Beard," at the ages of five and six My memories are vivid, but intermittent, because if I had only my memory to go by I should have to conclude that there must have been no funny man and no songs in either production But I have only to shut my eyes now to visualise the scene at Cinderella's wedding Cinderella and the Prince approached through a double row of fairies poised in mid-air, and I can remember still the thrill of triumph with which I realised that I now had the best of evidence with which to confute the heresies of a certain young scoffer of my acquaintance who had insisted that fairies did not exist Another scene which lives quite clearly in my mind is the one in which Dandini, the page, tries the slipper, first on the ugly sisters, and then on Cinderella, because I remember being very much worried by this scene In my version of Cinderella



there was no such person as Dandin<sup>1</sup>, consequently I felt very much as a keen Shakespearean might if some producer invented an entirely new character and interpolated him into Hamlet. But I did not in the least mind what any of these people said. So long as they did the right things, I was satisfied. It was the authentic land of fairy-tales, and the tawdriness, the vulgarity, and the second-rate acting did not exist for me, though I dare say my grown-up companions discussed it sadly over my head just as my own generation does now over the heads of its offspring.

I am very far from suggesting that the pantomime is a better place to take a child to than "Peter Pan" or any of the other children's plays which have sprung up since the advent of that classic. All that I do maintain, in the face of any scornful people whatsoever, is that if you take a child to a decent pantomime it will enjoy itself. And I don't believe, either, that the younger generation is quite so sophisticated and blasé as our comic artists would have us think. There always have been precocious sprigs of children, and I suppose always will be, but, after all, if children were not bored by the Harlequinade in the days when Gilbert wrote the ballad about a baby who was born, "with a miniature—miniature glass in his eye" and "died, an enfeebled old dotard, at five," why should they now? Anyhow, the last time I was myself at a Harlequinade I saw a small incident which pointed pretty definitely in the other direction (if incidents may be said to point). A great many crackers had been produced on the stage and thrown into the stalls—the Clown noticed a small boy in a stage box leaning eagerly out

and hoping a cracker would come his way So, being a nice Clown, he came to the side of the stage and, holding a cracker aloft, said, "Come on, little boy Crack one with Funny!" The small boy, immensely proud, leaned over, but at the last second his nerve failed A thin wail was heard through the theatre The small boy hid his face in his nurse's lap, and the Clown went away disappointed The pathos of this moving tale lies in its sequel Just before the end, when most people were hunting under their seats for their hats and coats, I saw that same small boy with a cracker in his hand, he was leaning so far out of his box that his nurse had to grab his feet, trying with all his might to attract Clown's attention But the Clown never saw, the curtain came down for the last time, and the child was borne away, still stretching his cracker towards the stage in vain hopes I had a fellow-feeling for him, because I had been that particular type of unenterprising small boy myself, and I knew that for days he would be kicking himself for not having taken his chance of glory when he had it In fact, I am afraid I waxed rather sentimental over it But, then, everybody is allowed to be a little sentimental at Christmas

—18th December, 1920.

## REPERTORY

“ REPERTORY ” is a word which is losing, or has lost, caste with the great multitude of mankind, much in the same way as the word “ æsthete ” lost it years ago. An æsthete was, in the beginning, a man whose perceptions were quick. Then it was narrowed down to mean a man who was quick in the perception of beauty. After that it was arrogantly assumed as a title of honour by people who claimed to perceive beauty where ordinary individuals could only see ugliness, so that, by an easy and comprehensible gradation, the word, to the plain man, denotes nowadays an intellectual snob with a distressing tendency to pose. If you tell any self-respecting artist (whatever his medium may be) that he is an æsthete, he will probably, if he is not too small and you are not too big, knock you down before you have a chance of explaining that you were only using the word in its literal, logical sense. The word has become connected in his mind with a cult, and is, *ipso facto*, dead and damned to all those outside the cult.

It seems to me that “ repertory ” is going the same way. The meaning of the word is perfectly plain and simple, and there is nothing in it to arouse emotion of any kind, but there is something in its associations which causes it to spell depression to many honest lovers of the theatre. This word, like

"æsthete," is connected with a cult A man will come up to you and say, "Look here, I want to take my wife out to a theatre to-morrow night What d'you recommend? We're a bit fed up with musical shows, and thought we'd like to see a decent play, if there is one" You recommend, say, the current play at the Everyman Theatre in Hampstead He looks a bit unconvinced "Er——" he says, uncomfortably, "er—yes That's one of those blighted repertory things, isn't it? What I mean to say is, we can't afford many shows nowadays, and we do want to enjoy ourselves when we *do* go out" And he goes away with an uneasy sense that you have been trying to inveigle him into improving his mind, and quite possibly, in his revulsion against the idea, he gives up thinking of seeing a good play, and makes quite sure of his evening's amusement by going to see Leslie Henson in "A Night Out" for the second time

This is not right Repertory ought not to cause the plain man to behave like that The very word ought to be an attraction and a promise The man who feels he "wants to see a decent play for a change" ought to be able to hie him to the nearest repertory theatre without—well, I will not say, without looking at the play-bill, but, at any rate, without doing more than making sure that the play is not calculated to tread on his pet corns He is able to do no such thing "Repertory" theatres are to him dreadful temples of gloom wherein dull and sordid plays with unappetising names like "Muck" and "Bilge" are acted in an atmosphere of reverent awe If challenged to give you his opinion on these plays he

will admit defiantly that no doubt you will write him down a crass Philistine, but the fact remains that he goes to the theatre to enjoy himself. And so on. The net result is that repertory theatres fail to flourish, and the wail goes up to heaven from all the cranks who love to take repertory under their wing that drama is dead. As a matter of fact, I believe that this wailing to heaven business is very largely responsible for the difficulties of repertory theatres. The wails are so very loud that they strike the plain man as overdone. "If it's these 'Muck' and 'Bilge' things that you're shrieking over," he says, "then drama is better dead, if you ask me." But the followers of the "Bilge" cult, who make the noise, never do ask him. They despise him. And as a natural consequence the theatre fails, and the unfortunate word "repertory" slips down one more rung of the ladder.

The repertory theatre exists with the object of raising the standard of public dramatic taste by giving the public a variety of good plays. The repertory theatre, like any other, depends (in the absence of subsidies) upon the support of the public, which I have personified as the plain man. Therefore, in order to obtain his support, the repertory theatre must give him the kind of plays he likes to see, while also attaining its own ideal of quality. But it has been discovered in the past that repertory theatres have had a tendency to fall short in both respects—to give the public plays which are rather well-intentioned than well-written, and whose appeal is rather to the members of the "cult" than to the public. But it is perfectly absurd for the "cult," then, to blame

the public for not supporting the theatre It is still more absurd for them to shriek that drama is dead The public that will not sit through "Muck" will throng in its thousands to see "The Skin Game" Very likely, to the initiated, "Muck" is the finer play of the two, but if the public taste is to be raised to the level of understanding "Muck," the process must be carried out by degrees, by feeding the public on good, but simple, plays which it can understand and appreciate Give your plain man "Muck" straight off, and he goes away and never comes back It is the only thing for him to do He dare not come back and tackle it again, even if he wants to This is not the fault of the people who run the theatre so much as of those of the "cult" who (in every sense of the word) patronise the theatre They get at the plain man by means of intellectual snobbery—the hardest of all to endure "How do you like 'Muck'?" they ask "Not at all," answers the plain man "Ah!" say they—meaning, "Ah! Of course *you* wouldn't" Rather than be subjected to this kind of treatment, the plain man stays away

Something like the foregoing must have happened to produce the public attitude towards repertory It is absurd to pretend, as some disgruntled enthusiasts do, that the public is unable to recognise a good play when it sees one I am not pretending that the standard of public taste is specially high, but a review of this year's productions would show a surprisingly short list of failures which deserved to succeed, and a gratifyingly long one of successes which were not mere pot-boilers And a public which will flock to see "The Beggar's Opera" and make Mr Fagan's

former Shakespeare season enough of a success to encourage him to his latest venture is not quite devoid of hope. And yet, a venture such as the Everyman Theatre is in danger of failure through lack of support. What other reason but prejudice can we assign for it? The company is an excellent one, containing some of the most promising of our younger actors and actresses. The choice of the plays is sound, not soaring over the ordinary play-goer's head. And yet, the little house—it only holds three hundred people—was too often half empty when Israel Zangwill's fine play, "The Melting-Pot," was being staged. What makes this fact still more astounding to me is the thought that it is in Hampstead that this thing should have occurred. Before the war I used to be told that Hampstead contained eighty-six thousand people—or so. It certainly contains no fewer to-day. Those people boasted a high standard of wealth, and a still higher standard of (I must say it)—of culture. Judging by the motor-cars in Fitzjohn's Avenue, the former at least is still with them. The very place, one would have said, for a theatre of the Everyman type—and yet only one play has scored a real success at this theatre, and that was the Christmas venture—the children's play by Mr Algernon Blackwood, which did so well that for a short run it was shown twice daily. But the holiday season is slipping behind us now, and things are gradually getting back to normal. It will be a thousand pities if the public allows "normal" at the little Hampstead theatre to mean the discouraging thing it was up to Christmas.

—20th January, 1921

## CHOOSING PLAYS

It is a truism that nobody can choose plays. There is no man with such an exact sense of the public taste that he can tell beforehand whether a given play will be a success or not. If anybody developed such a power, he would be well advised to keep the fact to himself, otherwise, he would speedily die of overwork—even if he succeeded in avoiding being badgered to death by mobs of eager managers. And since, in theory, nobody can choose plays, there seems to have grown up a general but foolish idea that in practice anyone can choose them—that because nobody can be sure of success everybody has an equal chance of succeeding.

The results of this cheerful delusion can be seen (for short periods) on the London stage in any season, but the failure of one man's poor play never seems to deter the next rash adventurer from losing money over another just as impossible. In fact, the regular first-nighter will find himself, once or twice in every season, expected to sit out entertainments which are almost incredibly bad—so bad that he gazes at the stage in bemused wonder how such a piece ever came to be produced. The only reason for the phenomenon that can be brought forward is that whoever has made it his business to choose that particular play has undertaken a very difficult job without having any



of the necessary qualifications for it, and without any sense that, by so doing, he has incurred a real responsibility not only to the public, but also to the actors, and possibly to the author also. Failures of this kind—those, I mean, which do not so much subside into oblivion as fall down with a reverberating crash—are generally light in intention, inept light comedies, disastrous farces, with an occasional dreadful musical comedy thrown in.

Exactly how these monstrosities are chosen for our stage I have no means of knowing, but you can imagine the process, as it might easily be, well enough. The self-appointed manager is sitting in his office, cogitating on his next production. "What shall it be?" he says to himself. "They say farce is the best money-maker—I'll put on a farce. Hi, boy—just go through that heap of plays in the corner and hand me out a farce, will you?" So he reads a page or two, and comes upon a scene where one of the characters gets hidden in a dust-bin. "That's the stuff to give 'em," he says. "I'll put this on." Or possibly, being a man with a certain amount of hard horse-sense, and having read that farce and a few others out of the heap in the corner, he realises that he cannot rely on his own judgment. He goes out, therefore, and buys a French or American farce which has run for some time in its native country and dumps it on to our stage, placidly oblivious of the fact that the native qualities which made a hit with foreign audiences are quite as likely to mystify as amuse the British public.

The result in either case—except by lucky accident—is failure, and nobody has any pity for the rash

adventurer Rushing in where angels might fear to tread, he has not only damaged his own reputation, but probably also those of actors and author The proper attitude of the public towards such a man was defined years ago by Mr Henry Arthur Jones Speaking in 1884 to the Play-goers' Club, on "The Dramatic Outlook," Mr Jones laid down certain rules for the guidance of those who wished to improve the standard of plays put before the public "In the early part of my address," he said, "I asked you to be very severe to all slipshod, careless, and palpably insincere work, but to no other I now ask you to be most tolerant, most lenient to all work of evidently sincere intention, from whose pen so ever it may come "

That advice is as sound to-day as it was when it was first spoken The first—perhaps the only—qualification required by the men who choose our plays for us is that they should be able to recognise and pay due respect to sincerity when they see it We cannot ask for much more The best motto for any theatrical manager, whether he looks upon the theatre as a means of artistic expression or merely as a place of popular amusement, is the familiar tag, " 'Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more—deserve it " Sincerity is just as much a necessity in a farce as in the highest of "high" comedies, or the deepest of tragedies, and whatever kind of entertainment a producer desires to provide, from the man who only wants to "give the public what they want" up to the man whose only thought is of Art, with an emphasised capital A, he must sincerely intend that what he does put forward

shall be the best possible of its kind, if he is to succeed

But even this intention is not enough. He may be as sincere in his own aims as it is possible for a man to be, but if he is not capable of recognising the same quality in an author, he is lost. Nothing shows up insincerity in a story so plainly as production on the stage. Once the curtain is up, and the bright glare from the footlights shines on to the characters, it becomes only too patently obvious whether the author has felt what he wrote, or whether he has written conventional stage clap-trap with his tongue in his cheek. It is painfully easy to see through such faults on the stage, in the limelight, it is very much more difficult to recognise the same defect in a manuscript. That demands a critical faculty of a delicate type, which is by no means always a part of the mental make-up of an actor or a manager. This, I suppose, is how it comes about so often that an actor or actress who most manifestly takes his or her art as seriously as can be, nevertheless chooses plays which give the finer qualities of that art no scope or opportunity.

It must not be thought that I am arguing that sincerity will ensure success. Nothing can do that. But sincerity deserves success, and the failure of a sincere piece of work leaves behind it no sort of stigma either on the management or upon the author. And since I have expressed contempt above for insincere farces, and the managements who put them on, let me give an instance on the other side. "Hanky-Panky John" is a farce, and it is—unfortunately—a failure. But in so far as it was manifestly sincere work, it

deserved success, and the reputations of neither Mr Basil MacDonald Hastings, who wrote it, nor Mr Stanley Logan, who put it on, have suffered in any way by reason of its failure. In fact, the play has once more shown us Mr Hastings as a writer who always does his best, and has introduced us to Mr Logan as a manager who can recognise sincerity when he sees it. Consequently, though the piece is a failure, it has actually enhanced the reputations of both these gentlemen, it gives us reason to expect good work from each of them in the future.

In exactly the same way, neither Mr Algernon Blackwood nor Mr Donald Calthrop suffered in any way (except financially) from the failure of "The Crossing" last season. In fact, the passionate sincerity of the author, and the equally passionate belief of the producer in that sincerity, made it impossible to feel anything but sympathy when their play failed to attract the public. It would be easy to multiply instances of the same kind. On the other hand, once a manager has accepted and produced one thoroughly insincere play, it remains as a permanent blot on his fair fame. You can never quite trust him again, you feel that he would not know a good play if he saw one. Unfortunately for him, once he has given himself away on this point he has no way of reinstating himself. He cannot, for instance, save himself by putting on only plays by authors of repute, because even authors of repute sometimes allow themselves to be cajoled by circumstances into writing below their best. The greatest authors will not do this, of course, but those authors who are first-rate rather than great may find themselves betrayed into

insincerity by the very ease of their own craftsmanship

Let us suppose that an author of this class has written a play of a quality far below his best. He feels, perhaps, that there is something wrong with it, but he comforts himself with the reflection that authors are notoriously bad critics of their own work. Anyhow, he will leave it to the manager to decide, he sends his play out. Now, if the manager has the requisite critical faculty, he will send back that play with regretful haste, but without that faculty the chances are that he is biased by the name on the title-page, reads the play through rose-tinted spectacles, produces it with joyous confidence that everything is going to be all right this time—and fails once more, bringing the author several pegs down with him in his fall.

—24th February, 1921

## A TEST OF TASTE

“ THE Old Women ” must, I should think, be drawing splendid houses to the Little Theatre Dramatically the piece is about as distasteful as it could be, but there is no doubt that its appeal to the less noble elements of human nature is tremendously strong It sets before itself one ideal, and one only—the crude desire of the Fat Boy to make your flesh creep That it succeeds, the stream of women hurrying for the exits on the first night is proof The play could hardly have a better advertisement than that hasty retreat, coupled with the subsequent rumours of hysterics in the foyer and in taxi-cabs which ran round the theatre That kind of thing generates in many people a perverse and morbid attraction which is half repulsion They want to go and find out exactly what the effect of this moving spectacle will be on themselves

The play has been the occasion of a good deal of controversy On the one side you have the critics, who have practically to a man condemned the play and demanded that it should be taken off at once On the other you have various members of the Little Theatre company who have defended the play, two of these defences I have seen, one by Miss Sybil Thorn-dike and one by Mr José Levy There may have been others, but these are all that I have happened to

come across, and they are both, to me, unconvincing in the extreme. Miss Thorndike described the play as being "a work of art" and "a beautiful play, perfectly worked out." I am going to explain below my detailed reasons for disagreeing with both these remarks. I yield to nobody, as I have proved more than once, in admiration for Miss Thorndike's acting, but the fact that a lady can act does not in the least mean that she can criticise, indeed, experience has taught me to discount the opinion of any actor or actress of a play in which he or she personally has a fine part, involuntarily but inevitably the part becomes to them greater than the whole. Mr José Levy's article appeared in the *Sunday Express*, and was an answer to a challenge by that journal to produce a plausible reason for continuing to include "The Old Women" in his bill. This Mr Levy does to his own satisfaction, but not to mine, nor (I imagine) to that of any unprejudiced observer.

Mr Levy objects to the statement that "The Old Women" is not art. "It is art," he says, "because of the amazingly clever stagecraft whereby the author first creates an atmosphere of eeriness and suspense, and then works gradually up to a culminating climax of horror." Up to this point I am entirely in agreement with Mr Levy, except for the last few words. The creation of the atmosphere is admirable, where the play goes wrong, and ceases to be art, is that its culminating climax is not one of horror but of pure beastliness. This is the only fault that I have to find with Mr Levy's defence, but it is a fundamental one. He is also, I think, ill-advised to quote Greek tragedy as an argument in his favour, because the one thing

that the Greeks would not tolerate was any scene of physical violence on the stage. All their murders or other deeds of horror were done behind the scenes. The spectators might hear the shrieks of the victims, but might never witness the crime.

I suppose most people who read these words know by this time what "The Old Women" is about, but in case there are some who do not I will recapitulate it in the briefest possible compass. Louise, a young girl, is about to be discharged as cured from an asylum. She has to sleep in the same room with two sinister old madwomen, without supervision. She knows that the old hags hate her for her youth, her beauty, and her recovered sanity. She fears that they, at the instigation of a yet more horrible old hag in the next ward, intend her some mischief. She pleads with the doctor to be allowed to change her room. He cannot arrange this, but although he hardly takes her fears seriously, he orders the fanatically religious sister-in-charge to remain all night in the room. The sister deserts her post to attend an all-night service, and the three old hags set on the girl and put out her eyes with a knitting-needle. Now, since the "Grand Guignol" has as its avowed object the production of thrills—that is to say, the rousing of its audience to a delicious condition of mental horror and suspense by the imagining of terrible situations—I take it that we are hardly entitled to grumble if it relies chiefly upon the presentment of disease, crime, madness, and other abnormalities to produce its effects. That is the easiest and simplest way of getting the required situations. That is why nothing can be said against the production of



"The Vigil," which is in the same programme and by the same author. But "The Old Women" goes out of its proper province. For me, at any rate, there is a perfectly definite moment in the action when the feeling of "delicious mental horror" stops and pure physical repulsion takes its place.

Assuming that the true aim of "The Old Women" should be mental suspense and horror rather than physical repulsion, it would seem so easy for the author to have achieved that aim. All through the earlier part of the piece (against which I have not a word to say) he seemed to be going to achieve it. As the situation developed, and it became clear that the girl Louise was going to be compelled to spend that last night at the mercy of the awful old hags, I looked forward to a climax in which, simply by working on her nervous terrors in the darkness and loneliness of the night, they should destroy her still precarious hold upon sanity—this time for ever. When the doctor returned in the morning, he would find her a raving, hopeless lunatic, condemned to remain shut up in the asylum for the rest of her life—condemned, possibly, to become herself just such another horrible old hag as her tormentors. Such a climax would at least have been dramatic, and it would have been just as horrible as the actual ending. Indeed, taken in all its implications, it would have been more horrible. I will not do the author the injustice of imagining that he had not considered the possibility of such an ending, the whole of the opening scenes seemed to point so unmistakably in its direction that the actual torture scene gave me the impression of being a deliberate avoidance of a natural

conclusion I am forced to believe, therefore, that physical repulsion was his aim rather than mental horror, that in writing this piece he had deliberately deserted the low but legitimate aim of writing a dramatic "shocker" in favour of the still lower aim of the Fat Boy. Therefore, by producing this play, the authorities of the Little Theatre have put themselves to the test in the matter of good taste, and have utterly failed to discriminate between what is dramatic in its appeal and what is purely pathological.

There is another interesting point—the acting. While the play is still dramatic, and the atmosphere is being worked up, the opportunities given to Miss Sybil Thorndike as Louise and to Misses Athene Seyler and Barbara Gott as the old women are many, and are wonderfully taken. Miss Thorndike is an adept at rendering terror to its last extremity. As soon as she entered we knew that something out of the ordinary must have been needed to reduce her to such a condition of fear, but when Miss Seyler and Miss Gott entered I for one realised that her fear was well founded. Those two old beldames gave me cold shivers down the back. Their mysterious and hideous glee over what was to happen that night when the third witch opened the door and gave the signal made my scalp crawl, and at the culminating moment, when the sister had gone and I could just make out in the semi-darkness that the two were sitting up in bed, and could just hear from Louise's corner the little whimper of pure terror as she too sat up—at that moment I was ready for anything. And a minute later, feeling quite detached and coldly disgusted, I was watching the Great Knitting Needle

Scene and thanking heaven that while I have an impressionable imagination, I have not a queasy stomach For, make no mistake about it, that last scene does not require acting Given the half-dark stage and the beautifully worked-up atmosphere, it could be done by any schoolboy who could snarl a bit

—21st July, 1921

## STANDARDS OF CRITICISM

NOT long ago, while drawing a comparison between two performances of "Antony and Cleopatra," I referred parenthetically to the fact that a critic should not judge professional and amateur acting by the same standard. Almost on the same day as that article was published, Mr José Levy, writing to the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph* to reply to my denunciation of "The Old Women," called attention to another and more important aspect of the same question. "I have often noticed," said Mr Levy, "that the critics of the London stage judge plays according to at least three distinct standards. They have one standard for musical comedy, another for what are sometimes called 'popular' plays, and a third for really ambitious experiments in theatrical art. The first-named standard is low, the second is quite low, and the third is very high." This appears to me to be a true saying, so far as it goes, but it leaves the words "at least" to bridge an enormous gap between the popular plays for which the standard is "quite low," and the ambitious work for which it is "very high."

\* This gap does not really exist. In between these two standards are several gradations of standards, just as between the "popular" plays and the "really ambitious experiments in theatrical

art " there are several gradations of plays Two striking and typical current examples of the popular play are " The Knave of Diamonds " and " The Edge o' Beyond " These two plays have no relation to life, and, therefore, no relation to art But between this kind of production and the " ambitious experiments in theatrical art " lies the great bulk of the work done by those of our dramatists who have serious claim to be called artists The fundamental principle which is implicit in all this is that the critic, in judging any play, must take into consideration its aim Criticism, while in itself an art, is not a creative art, it is dependent on creative art When the playwright chooses his subject, he chooses the dramatic critic's subject also It is true that the critic may make a great deal more of the subject from his own point of view than the playwright does from his, there are many dead writings whose ghosts still haunt the earth because of the things that some brilliant critic has found to say about them But the fact remains that the critic's subject is found and his standard fixed for him by the author The critic's business is to discover what the author has aimed at in writing his play or his book, and to judge, first, how far that aim is worthy, and second, how far the author has succeeded in his aim

From this it is plain that to every play a critic must apply two standards The first is absolute and unvarying, by it the critic decides for himself how far any class of play is in itself worth while By such a standard the least successful attempt at high comedy must rank above the most triumphant " popular " play But the second standard, by

which the critic is to judge simply how far an author has succeeded in his aim, must vary as the aim varies. To criticise a "popular" trifle such as "Skittles" by the same standard as a play by Mr Galsworthy would be manifestly unfair to the authors of "Skittles," who set out to write a sentimental comedy with much appeal to the popular imagination and no great pretensions to literary or artistic merit. In this aim they have succeeded, and they are entitled—so to speak—to full marks. But they are only in the lower fourth form of the dramatic school, Mr Galsworthy is a distinguished member of the upper sixth, and more is expected of him. To judge him by the lower fourth standard and award him full marks and a special prize every time would be as unfair to him as it would be to British drama.

If I may keep to my scholastic metaphor for the sake of clearness, the critic's highest duty is to see that the sixth form contains none but sixth-form intellects. This point is made so clear by Matthew Arnold in his essay on "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" that it hardly seems necessary to bring any argument in its support. It is a duty at once responsible and tremendously difficult. The sixth form should be the preserve of the first-rate, and therefore its standard must be very—almost prohibitively—high. In the fifth form the standard is quite high, a playwright who attains to it is deservedly held in honour, and the line of demarcation between the two forms is not easy to draw. But the critic must be prepared to draw it, and draw it firmly, even if by doing so he excludes from the highest form many ambitious experimenters in theatrical

art who firmly believe that their place is with the elect

Against this latter form of self-deception or pretentiousness the critic must be particularly severe. The second-rate writer who asserts a claim, or on whose behalf a claim is asserted, to be considered first-rate is deserving of the worst that can happen to him in the way of considered criticism. Occasionally you find a third or fourth-rate writer putting forth a similar claim, but in this case the work itself is its own condemnation. The work of such a man is either ignored by the critics or treated with gentle ridicule. Occasionally, however, either for the sake of example or for some outside reason, a critic will take the trouble to judge such a man by the standard he has claimed to have applied to his work.

The classical example of this is Macaulay's scathing and most detailed essay on Mr Robert Montgomery's poems. The unfortunate Mr Montgomery occupies a prominent position in that pale company of ghosts of which I have spoken above, for his poems have perished and he himself is known to us only because Macaulay selected him to be the victim of this spirited piece of reasoned invective, but in his day he was hailed as a great poet. The chief poem that he wrote was an epic on "The Omnipotence of the Deity." This was a pretentious subject, or rather it was a subject which was bound to become pretentious in the hands of any but a first-rate poet. It was because Mr Montgomery, by assiduous "puffing," had been foisted as first-rate upon the public, and because his first poem had run into eleven editions, that Macaulay considered it worth his while to prove

him to be nothing better than an incompetent plagiarist

We had a striking instance of the same thing here in London not long ago—this time it was not a poet, but a dramatist that invited censure. A certain lady novelist, whose writings command a very wide sale among a section of the public not usually credited with discrimination in literary matters, dramatised one of her novels and produced it at a suburban theatre. It was announced that after a preliminary run in the suburbs this play would be transferred to the West End, there to be succeeded in due course by other plays from the same pen. Accordingly, on the opening night many of the London critics made the journey to the suburbs, prepared to judge the play according to the standards imposed upon them by the authoress. The play turned out to be a crude and unsophisticated melodrama of a type familiar enough to the less exacting provincial audiences, but it would have been laughed off the West End stage in a week. Accordingly, next day the papers with one voice “slated” the play, and no more was heard of the West End theatre project. The play took its proper place as a certain “draw” for the theatrically second-rate provincial towns, where for all I know it may still be doing well. In this case a purely “popular” play was—owing to the claims put forward on its behalf—treated as though it had pretensions to be considered as literature or art. If it had been judged on its face value, as a “popular” play with no such pretensions, it would certainly not have been so severely handled, in fact, as the provincial notices subsequently showed, something might then have been said in its favour.



The letter from which I quoted at the head of this article goes on to suggest that "it must often have occurred to the serious dramatists and the experimenters, those in fact who are endeavouring to do pioneer work in the theatre," that it is a little unfair that they should be judged by a very high standard, while less ambitious work receives more lenient treatment. But I hope I have shown that it would really be unfair to these men to judge them by any other standard than the highest

—25th August, 1921

## MAKING A PUBLIC

MUCH lamentation and gnashing of teeth was heard in the land some time ago because this, that, and the other playhouse had been turned into a picture palace and because of the alleged risk that the theatre generally was running of being ousted by "the movies" and of perishing altogether. At that time both stage and screen were suffering from slumps. There seem to be signs that the theatre slump is coming to an end. At any rate, there are quite a number of plays at present playing to "capacity"—which was certainly not the case in the summer. The picture-theatre slump will prove, I imagine, more lasting. The reasons for it are more deep-seated.

At the moment both screen and stage—screen especially—are in a transition period. The transition in question is from a condition of highly artificial prosperity to whatever is to be the normal for the future. I say "screen especially" because nobody yet knows what the normal in the film trade is going to be. The films have practically no pre-war past. The scope and the technique of picture-making made its greatest advance during the abnormal years when every place of amusement was crammed, no matter what fare it provided. As a result all such places had a tendency to provide bad and cheap fare. There was such a rush to buy films of any and every description that the picture-theatre owners booked themselves up blindly, months and even years ahead, to produce

films they had never even seen This was a mad policy As the public got over its war excitement and lost its war prosperity it began to discriminate It would only go to the picture-theatre if the programme was good, and the exhibitors found that the "block booking" policy had ensured for them that the programme was only good now and then, by accident

The technical film-trade adjective (I love film-trade English) for a spectator who has learnt to discriminate between a good film and a bad one seems to be "screen-wise" Nowadays you have only to go to a picture-theatre when an inept, machine-made film is being run through to realise how many people are becoming "screen-wise" in these days There is a heavy, bored atmosphere all round the house You hear a buzz of conversation about you, which resolves itself, if you listen, into a caustic flow of sarcastic criticism People only sit such a film out because there is another one coming afterwards which may be better Not so long ago, the average frequenter of the picture-theatre would rather see a bad film than no film at all Now, he would rather sit at home than pay money to be bored by a bad film

In fact, the novelty of the film has begun to wear off It is no longer simply a popular craze which everybody followed for a while and then dropped (like rinking) It has in future got to make its way on its merits as an art One of the results of this will be that the gentry who rushed into film-making as a speculation, much as they or their predecessors rushed into rink-building, will have to close down and find a new field for their activities, because it is on their ability to make good, interesting pictures that success

will depend for the future—an ability for the most part non-existent. This weeding-out process has already begun, its effects are seen in the published reports of the number of speculative film-producing firms which have failed recently, especially in America.

The importance to the stage of this promised emergence of a discriminating public at the picture-theatres is evident. The film-play, owing to its greater economy of money and space, has been able to do two things which the theatre proper could never have done. It has created a new play-going public where there was none before, and it has turned an ignorant public which did exist into a sophisticated and critical one. In these days, when every tiny little country town and almost every village has its picture-theatre, there must be thousands of experienced play-goers who a generation back might have lived their lives out without seeing a play at all. Those who thirty years ago would gaze in simple wonder at the most elementary of "shows," and who would have regarded themselves as living in a giddy whirl of delight if they had been visited by more than two companies of barnstormers, Grand Circuses, or what-not in one year, have now the opportunity of forming a critical judgment by the constant comparison of plays which are changed twice weekly and may be acted by the world's greatest artists.

That opportunity has not yet been turned to very much use. The novelty of the thing is still too exciting. Much of the new public is still just a child with a new toy. But it will grow up soon. The result of the universal appeal of the cinema is that it is accomplishing slowly and by practical methods the purpose

for which many excellent societies and leagues exist. Such societies, founded for the purpose of establishing a love of good drama among the people, generally make the usual "high-brow" mistake of giving the people what (in the opinion of the high-brows) it ought to like rather than leading its taste gradually upwards by way of what it does like. They forget that the one primary aim of the theatre is to give pleasure, and that as soon as the desire to elevate or educate swamps the desire to give pleasure, the theatre loses not only its popular appeal, but its justification for existence. I have myself been present at entertainments given to East Enders which would have been attended with real pleasure by the more precious of the garden suburbans and the dwellers in the parts of Chelsea about King's Road. The East Enders were polite but puzzled, but showed not a trace of the enthusiasm of darkened souls upon whom the blessed light of Art was breaking. The leagues and societies go too fast. They try to urge their proselytes to run before they can walk, with the result that the proselytes tumble down at the start. But where these good, earnest people fail, the cinema, guided not by high ideals, but by the laws of its own evolution, looks as though it might succeed. It began in the soundest possible way by creating a popular enthusiasm for itself, it fed that popular enthusiasm with plays of a low average level until the people began to discriminate—to flock in thousands to the few good plays, and to avoid as many of the bad ones as possible. Now it finds that in order to keep that popular enthusiasm alight, it must improve its wares to keep pace with the improvement in the public taste. How far this upward tendency will go it would be rash to prophesy, but at least it is a

stronger movement than anything which the regular stage could have accomplished

This brings us back to my starting-point. What effect is the cinematograph going to have upon the regular theatre in the future? I am sure that the croakers who will have it that the screen is going to kill the stage are as wrong as they can possibly be. In making a new public for itself, the cinematograph inevitably makes a new theatre-going public also. To whatever pitch film drama may be developed, it must always lack certain qualities that are the spoken drama's greatest assets. Chief among these is the actual personal presence of the actor, and the sound of his voice. The experienced play-goer sits through the tensest film-play unmoved, or moved only in an aloof, intellectual sense, but in the theatre that same play-goer may find himself shaken to his depths. They are talking of producing Shakespeare for the films. Imagine, then, that after his recent performance at the Court Theatre Mr Godfrey Tearle is asked to play Othello on the screen. However finely Mr Tearle may act the death scene, can you think for one moment that he could create one-tenth of the effect that his delivery of that superb piece of poetry produced on the stage? I cannot. In time, as the new public gains more and more play-going experience, and learns by comparison and discussion what is what, it too will learn that, while it is cheap and pleasant to pay regular visits to the nearest cinema, yet an occasional expedition, farther afield, and at greater cost, to the nearest theatre produces a higher and more lasting pleasure.

—15th September, 1921

## MANTZIUS

I MAY as well confess frankly that when the sixth and last volume of Kail Mantzius' "History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times" was laid on my desk I had never heard of the author or of his work. In fact, for one moment I thought that the messenger who had brought me this one imposing volume was about to return immediately with the other five. In that case, I felt, my only course would be to obtain a month's holiday and retire into the country, to emerge therefrom with an encyclopædic knowledge of the theatre, but probably needing another month's holiday in a nursing home.

However, no more volumes arrived, and I discovered from internal evidence that the former five had all been published some time ago, probably in those days just before the war when I was too busy trying to pass examinations to have time to acquire any really useful knowledge. Even by itself, however, the Danish actor's last volume looked too impressive for me to embark upon it in a light or frivolous mood. I put it aside for the moment, accordingly, and turned to something less solid, but later on my conscience reminded me that I had a duty towards Messrs Duckworth, the publishers. "If it were done," said my conscience—rather tritely, I thought—"when 'tis done, then Messrs Duckworth have a

right to consider that 'twere well it were done quickly " So one morning I rose early, and, giving instructions for a wet towel to be brought to me if I should ring, prepared myself for a dose of Heavy Reading

I was wrong Just how completely wrong I was I make it my joyful task to proclaim here I read the book practically at a sitting, and there was never a moment when the wet towel was in even the remotest danger of being sent for The book is written in such easy, flowing style, it proceeds with such clarity to its appointed end, and incidentally it has been so excellently translated that in spite of the fact that it is pouring knowledge into you all the time, it makes the pleasantest reading possible

The actual subject of this volume is a history of Classicism and Romanticism, it follows out the rise of these two movements in England, France, and Germany—the book being divided for that purpose into three separate parts These parts are again subdivided—the English section into three, dealing with Sheridan's management of Drury Lane, the Kemble School, and Edmund Kean And from the very beginning it is clear why the author is enabled to deal with such a mass of material, and to digest such a staggering quantity of information as he possesses. It is because in each part of his book he is always perfectly clear in his own mind what he is driving at, with the natural consequence that he never allows himself to be attracted down bypaths, however pleasant Whatever chances to be his main theme at the moment occupies his attention wholly When he is discussing the Kemble School, for instance, he



mentions anybody and everybody whose name crops up normally as a result of that discussion, but however interesting in himself the owner of such a name may be, the author deals with him strictly according to his importance as a member of, or influence upon, the Kemble School. Further information, if it must be given, is relegated to footnotes. Yet so complete is the picture of the contemporary English stage which you obtain by this means that you are at a loss which to admire most—the enormous store of information which the author has at command, or the art which he has brought to the task of selection.

In the same way, the section of the book dealing with the French stage divides itself naturally into four parts. First comes a review of the period of classic decadence which had set in with the last days of the French monarchy, and which showed the first signs of ending when Beaumarchais made a success with "*Le Mariage de Figaro*." Then follows a section, "*The Theatre Under the Revolution*," containing an account of the chaos which naturally existed in the theatre under the repressive rule of "the people"—a rule which reminds one irresistibly of the restrictions said to have obtained in Russia at the time of their revolution, when an English agent was requested to supply a play for Moscow, the chief stipulation being that the hero should be a soldier not above the rank of sergeant, and that there should be in the cast a member of the bourgeoisie who should come to a bad end. (I believe, but am not sure, that "*Sleeping Partners*"—with the necessary alterations—eventually filled the bill. That, however, is by the way.)

The third section, "*The Empire*," deals with the

reconstitution of the theatre under Napoleon, and the rise to full power of Talma, the great actor who dominates all the French stage history of this period, and yet, having been born a Romantic before his time, felt himself to have been wasted. When he was at the very summit of his fame he said to Victor Hugo, then a youth just writing his "Cromwell" "The actor is nothing without his part, and I have never had a real part. No one knows what I might have been if I had found the author I was seeking. As it is, I shall die without once having acted." His prophecy came true, in 1826, the year "Cromwell" was completed, Talma died. Hugo, despairing of finding another actor to play the part of Cromwell, contented himself with publishing the drama in book form, but within a few years he and Alexandre Dumas had firmly established the Romantic School on the French stage, and with the history of that school, as far as the career of Frédérick Lemaître, Mantzius's last section concerns itself.

Very different was the evolution of Romanticism in Germany. Here the Classical School had neither flourished nor decayed so fiercely as in France. The first section of this part of the book concerns itself with Goethe and Schiller and the school which they founded in the queer, poverty-stricken, half-amateur little theatre at Weimar. Then comes, perhaps, the most impressive chapter of the whole volume—that in which Dr Mantzius traces the rise of the Romantic School in Germany, and explains how essentially different this movement was from the corresponding revolt in France, and how much less admirable. In Germany, he says, "there was no mummy-like

incubus of Classicism to revolt against—Romanticism as a militant poetic school was so far from being natural and necessary that it would be nearer the mark to call it an absurdity. And in fact it was not a spontaneous growth in the minds of the poets, but a graft budded on to them from the lecture-room.” After developing this theme the author goes on to trace the rise in Germany of “a new type of actor—the morbid, inspired, dæmonic type.” And then, after a quietly humorous account of the Berlin theatre under a typical Prussian bureaucracy, Dr Mantzius brings his work to a close with a detailed consideration of the “only actor who gave expression in really vital, pregnant form to the ideals of the Romantic school of poetry.”—Ludwig Devrient

The author's very firm adherence to his self-appointed limits leads him inevitably to omit from his survey the work of many dramatists and actors whom one would like to see included. But his preface shows clearly that such omissions have been made of deliberate purpose. “In closing my book at this point,” he says, “I am not merely actuated by the consideration that everything must come to an end. My chief reason is that, if my work has been properly done, these six volumes should serve as a description of the whole foundation on which modern theatrical art is based.” That his work has been properly done few of Dr Mantzius's readers will wish to deny. For myself, my chief purpose in life at the moment is to beg, borrow, or steal—or even, if all other methods fail, to buy—his five former volumes

—22nd December, 1921